

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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THE TESTIMONY OF CHRIST TO THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

John 5:35-41

PRAYER: *Father God, I do thank you for the precious blood of Jesus. Father, this is that time when we as a church come together to focus on that blood, on that cross, on what you've done for us at the cross. Father, I pray this day, this morning, as we do that, you would give us the privilege of the presence of your Holy Spirit. Guide us into truth, Lord, your word is truth, your Spirit brings that truth to us, and so I pray this morning that you would give us that presence, that we would make these truths a permanent part of our lives, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, once again, as you know, it's the first Sunday of the month, and the first Sunday of the month is the Sunday that we have set aside to remember Christ and his cross. And Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples for the last time and there he celebrated the very last Passover. And we read this in Matthew 26:26. It says: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples,*

and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Jesus took the bread and he took the wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and blood and then he asked his disciples to do the same, to eat the bread and to drink the cup in order to symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. He then asked them to repeat this remembrance of the sacrifice on a regular basis, and that's what we're doing this morning. This what we call "the Lord's table," and as we say each month, we celebrate it by doing four things. Number one, meditating on what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us on the cross; number two, examining ourselves, asking God's Holy Spirit to convict us of sins; number three, confessing our sin; and number four, partaking in the elements. John 6:53 says: *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

Now, we've been following the life of Jesus in the gospel of John, and last time we looked at Jesus turning a corner in his

relationship with the religious leaders. He turned that corner by healing somebody on the Sabbath, and this led to one of the most extensive discourses Jesus ever had with these religious leaders. Jesus spoke at length of his identification with his Father, and he made the case over and over again that he did precisely what his Father did because he and his Father were one. And the scripture itself is clear, the religious leaders saw this and understood this as Jesus claiming to be God and God incarnate. Jesus continues this discourse even after he had proved over and over again that he and his Father were one, and he spoke at length about his relationship with his Father. This is what he said in John 5:30. He said: *"By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me."* Jesus seeks to please him who sent him. I said last time, this is an organizing principle that defines Jesus' life. This is what drives virtually everything that he does. It is pleasing his Father. I said it is the glory of God and that is the organizing principle that defines the Father, directs the Spirit, and drives the Son.

And at the end of his earthly ministry as he approached the cross, Jesus said this in John 17:1, he said: *"Father, the hour has come. Glorify your son, that your Son may glorify you."* That's why Jesus came to this planet. Pleasing his Father had come down

to this set of facts that Jesus spoke in John 17:4, he said: *"I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."* So this is the glory that Jesus is lecturing the religious leaders about. Remember, he's just healed somebody and he's healed them on the Sabbath, and they are furious over that because their goal was never the glory of God. Their goal was self-preservation. The religious leaders had been on the attack, and Jesus knows this is not a discussion. This is an inquisition. Jesus also knows that these folks are not there to dialogue with him. They are there to gather enough evidence to kill him. John 5:18 says: *This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own father, making himself equal with God.*

Now, as we follow this discourse, we follow the dialogue, we see at this point there's an abrupt change in the dialogue. Jesus begins to shift from defense to offense, and he starts off by explaining the testimony about himself, why that testimony is legitimate. You see, in Jewish law, all testimony had to be corroborated by at least two or three witnesses, and so Jesus brings out three or more of these witnesses. And he starts out by disclaiming his own testimony, and he acknowledges as every Jew did that no Jew would

accept self testimony as legitimate. So then he trots out his witnesses, and he lists at least three that we'll be looking at. One is the prophet of God, the other is the works of God, and the third is the word of God.

So the first of these witnesses that Jesus brings forth is the prophet of God. We see this in John 5:31. Jesus says: *"If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is true. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light."* John is Jesus' first witness. And you know, the Jews once sent a delegation to John asking him who he was, and Jesus acknowledges this in verse 33, he says, *"You've sent to John and he's testified to the truth."* This was the truth that John testified to. This is John 1:19. It says: *Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us, what do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the*

prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

That was John's testimony. And John's testimony made no secret of the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, he understood that in a way that even the disciples didn't grasp until the Holy Spirit infilled them at Pentecost, and he testified to it at the baptism of Jesus which took place the very next day after he had spoken to this delegation. John 1:29 records that. It says this, it says: *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"*

Now, in two short sentences John points out that first of all, that Jesus was the eternal God who had stepped into time itself. He says, "A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me." And John also points out secondly that Jesus came to do what even the disciples could not grasp. He was not there to

become a great teacher or leader or philosopher or example. He was there to become our substitute, our sacrifice, our sin bearer. John said, *"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

You know, for thousands of years, Jews annually sacrificed the Passover lamb whose blood smeared on their door posts had protected their forefathers from the Angel of death. Now in Jesus we had the ultimate lamb, the lamb whose blood would provide the ultimate protection from death, and that lamb, John testified, had arrived on the earth. The lamb that all those thousands and thousands of slaughtered lambs had been pointing to was about to be baptized by John the Baptist. And it was John who stood as the first of these three witnesses that Jesus is bringing forth.

The works of his Father was his second witness. Verse 36, he says this: *"I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish -- the very works that I am doing -- testify that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me."*

Now, once again, if you remember the immediate context of these words, you realize that one of these works that Jesus is referring to has just happened. He's just healed this man who had been

crippled for 38 years. He's been made whole. And the fact that he'd been there 38 years meant there was no denying that is this was a genuine miracle, that this was a mighty work that could only have been accomplished by the hand of God. In fact, Nicodemus was one of the religious leaders' own, it was he who said this to Jesus in John 3:2, he said, *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs that you are doing if God were not with him."* So Jesus' works were a witness, they were a witness that God was working through him.

But understand what Jesus is doing here, he's doing more than just lining up witnesses. He's actually starting to build his case against these religious leaders. He's going to prove something that you and I already know, and that is that salvation is far more a matter of the heart than it is of the eyes and the ears. You know, you can speak with facts and you can speak with the truth, but if the person that you are speaking to has no heart for the truth, it will make no difference whatsoever.

It was Ben Franklin who said: "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." True words. And Jesus was addressing men who had eyes and ears but were blind and deaf. He was telling them that he was God incarnate. John 5:18: *He was even calling God his own father, making himself equal with God.* And even though

the testimony of his works was airtight, it would never, never move a hardened heart, 'cause only God can do that.

One of the foundational beliefs of reformed theology is that it is God and not man who moves people from unbelief to belief. That notion is a paradigm in the true sense of the word. You know, a paradigm refers to the lens through which you view everything. And God's sovereignty is a faith paradigm. If you understand what Hebrews 12:2 is saying when it says: Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, then you understand that your faith and my faith is a story that Jesus originates, empowers, and finishes. It is a gift that he bestows on whom he chooses. That's why some folks get it and some folks will never get it. Jesus made that clear when he said this to some other leaders who had done the exact same thing, they had rejected his works. Listen to what Jesus says in John 10:25. He says: *Jesus answered them, "i told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand."*

As the elders begin distributing the bread, I would like us to take a few moments to consider the privilege that Jesus is speaking of here. I would like us to meditate on that. The Good Shepherd speaks and only his sheep can hear. So the question that we have to ask is: Do we hear him? Are we his sheep?

Again, as the elements are being passed out, I want to repeat this warning we repeat each time. This is from 1 Corinthians 11:28. It says: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.*

I repeat this every month. I say communion is an extremely serious undertaking, and to enter into it in an unworthy manner is to literally court disaster. You know, if you are not absolutely convinced that you are a child of the King, and again, I want to make this clear, that doesn't mean that you have to sit here flawlessly spotless in order to be worthy. You have to be sitting here washed in the blood of the Savior in order to be worthy. That's the requirement. And if you are not certain if you are a

child of the King, then just pass the elements on. Again, I say this every month, people will not look at you strange. They will not think that there's something weird or odd about you. In fact, they'll think you're wise.

1 Corinthians, the 11th chapter, the 23rd verse says: *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* Take and eat.

Well, there are other works that served as witnesses to Jesus' miraculous power. This crippled man who was made whole was not an isolated incident. In fact, by the time that miracle had already taken place, Jesus had already turned water into wine at Cana, he had already healed an official's son, and Nicodemus had already had that interview with Jews where he expressed the fact that the religious leaders knew that Jesus' works were from God, but Jesus knew and we see that those works only served to harden the hearts of his enemies. They were no closer to belief in spite of those miracles. But as Jesus begins to bring out his third witness, we see a shift in tone that accompanies Jesus' description of this witness.

The third witness is the word of God. It was a witness that none of these leaders had anticipated. It was a witness they had never expected. See, the word of God was their history, their culture, their guidebook, and their life. And in one stroke, Jesus had made it into a hostile witness against them. This is what he said. He said: *"You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."*

See, these leaders had prided themselves on their love of God and especially on their love of his word. Jesus' witness testified to the fact that not only was that love nonexistent but they who falsely claimed to profess that love didn't even realize it. Pride had made them spiritually deaf and blind. So when the witness turned against them, they were speechless. You know, it's incredibly easy for us to read those words -- and I've done it many, many times -- to read those words and just assume that they are directed solely at the religious leaders who wanted nothing to do with Jesus as Lord. But they are not. Jesus says in verse 39: *"You study the scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."* There's a

warning here for us. You see, you can study the scriptures diligently and if you don't see the witness of Christ in that study, you will be as lost as those religious leaders were, because every single word of scripture is pointed in the direction of Jesus Christ. And it is our task to approach God's word seeking to receive from it not what we expect, but what God intends. It was Jesus who said, *"These are the very scriptures that testify about me."* We know we can make the Bible testify to anything we want it to. We can make the Bible say that God wants you rich, prosperous, and healthy. We can make the Bible say that Christ's blood gives us the freedom to embrace any sinful life-style we want. We can make the Bible say that Christ's blood is not enough, that we have to add our righteousness to it in order to be saved. You can pick any one of those life-styles and begin data mining the Bible, and within minutes, you can have proof texts and Bible quotes that will justify anything you want. You can selectively edit the Bible to say in Psalm 14, it says: *"There is no God."* All you have to do is ignore the first part of that verse which says: *The fool says in his heart there is no God.* The point is you can make the Bible say whatever you want it to say, but God will ultimately have the last word.

I think at last count there's something like 14 churches in the greater Port Jervis area. You can go around to all of these

different churches and you'll probably find a half dozen different approaches to understanding God and his word, and you would probably find that each group thinks that the other group is on their way to hell, whether literally or figuratively. So how do you know, how do you cut through the fog, to get to what God's word really means? How do we understand it rightly? Well, I'm hesitant to say this for fear that someone will misinterpret it, but the bottom line is this. You see, the Bible is a magical book. Now, it's not magical in the sense of witchcraft or forbidden knowledge, but it's magical in the sense that Hebrews 4:12 states it. It says this: *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, it is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.* God says that his word is a two-edged sword. That means it cuts both ways. When I give it to you, it is cutting me as it is cutting you, because it is a supernatural book in every sense of the word.

Now, these religious leaders didn't treat it as though it was living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. They just saw it as their weapon of choice, until Jesus used it to cut them to pieces. Jesus went on to say this in verse 41, he said: *"I do not accept glory from human beings but I know you, I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts."* Jesus also

knew that their search of the scripture would be fruitless. They lacked the eyes to see, they lacked the ears to hear because they just didn't have the heart for it. See, the religious leaders had no idea, but they were challenging the very author of the word of God, the one who had formed every single word including the jots and the tittles, the one who knew just how magical this book was. See, Jesus knew that the word of God was a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And because he knew that their hearts were far from him, he also knew that their search for truth would always come up empty. So he said, *"I do not accept glory from men, but I know you -- that you have no love for God within you."*

So here is the answer. Here's the answer to cutting through the fog of all the different approaches to God and his word. Here's our solution to finding what God truly has to say to us in his word. It's really very simple. Unless you have a love of God within your heart, you will never be able to search the scriptures for truth. Like I said, the word of God is a magical book and it will not yield its truth to hardened hearts. But here's the problem. The problem is all of us have hardened hearts. All of us outside of the grace of God would be right there, right in the thick of those religious leaders. We'd be there seeking to kill Jesus rather than worship him. I think of Stuart Townend's lyrics,

they put it well. It says: Behold the man upon the cross, my sin upon his shoulders, ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.

You see, all of us at one time shouted with them, "His blood be on us and on our children." You know, there are only two roles that we could have had had we been there at the cross. One role was to be with the scoffers in the crowd, the other role was to be with the cowards among the disciples. That's all that was there, with some very notable exceptions, all of whom were women.

So when we read about these hard-hearted religious leaders, these blinded and deaf leaders of the blind, don't be too quick to put a distance between them and you, because the only distance between them and you is grace. And it's frighteningly easy to forget that we are saved by grace through faith and this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God. See, these religious leaders are proof that you cannot fix what you don't realize is broken. They're also proof that you will never go wrong in challenging the motives of your own heart.

But the solution. How do we do that? The solution to this challenge is far simpler than you may think. It is the solution that David found, he sought and found in Psalm 51. David had just

come through a period of time when his heart was as wicked and as blind and as deaf as it could possibly be. He had committed terrible sins. He had committed the sins of adultery and murder and lying, and they had in turn hardened his heart. But David belonged to God, and God saw to it through the prophet Nathan that David would be brought back to his senses, that David would receive the gift of repentance. And when he did, when he realized how wicked his heart had become, this is the prayer that he prayed before God. Psalm 51. He says: *Against You -- and You alone -- I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge. Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me. Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within. Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all of my guilt. God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and give me a willing spirit. Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and your sinners will return to you.*

You see, David recognized first and foremost that his problem was a

matter of the heart. But you know, the solution for him is the exact same solution for us. We have wicked hearts. But we have a God who can create in us clean hearts. We have spirits that long to chase after everything that belongs to the world: The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. But we have a God who can renew a steadfast spirit within us, and all we have to do is ask. James says: *We have not because we ask not.* David asked of God a clean heart and a renewed spirit, and God was delighted to grant that. You see, it was his hardened heart that had blinded his eyes and stopped his ears. The same was true for the wicked religious leaders, but they never sought nor ever received a remedy. And as a result, the very scripture that they claim to cherish became the primary witness against them.

This is what Jesus says in verse 43. He says: *"I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? But do not think that I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?"* Jesus tells them flat out in verse 46, *"If you believe Moses, you would have believed me, for he wrote*

about me." You see, every single word of scripture, every jot, and every tittle, points to Jesus Christ.

The central event in all of history is the cross that Christ came to die on. The central theme of the word of God from Genesis to Revelation is the glory of God through Christ at that cross. And for reasons known only to God, he has chosen us to speak and live out his word in this world. It's not a difficult task. It's an impossible task. We don't have the heart for it, we don't have the spirit for it. But God does. God does, and God delights to give it to us. All we have to do is ask.

God tells us in 2 Corinthians 12:9: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.* And that's why we reply: *Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me.*

As the elders begin to distribute the cup, I would like us to meditate for a bit, I would like us to consider the fate of the wicked religious leaders. They were blind, they were deaf leaders guiding their people into a pit, and Jesus used the very word of God that they had trumpeted to condemn them. There in God's word is a cautionary tale for you and for me. The caution is this: pride will blind you, then it will kill you, and you will not even

realize that it's happening.

The Lord's table is the place where one beggar tells another that there's food here for both of us. As you take the fruit of the vine, as you meditate, consider the heart of God's glory. Again, Stuart Townend: "That He should give his only Son and make a wretch his treasure." We are that wretch. But we are that treasure as well. 2 Corinthians 4:7 says: *Now we have this treasure in clay jars. Why? So that his extraordinary power may be from God and not from us.* 1 Corinthians, the 11th chapter, the 25th verse says this: *In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."* Take, and drink.

This is the part of the service that we call heads, heart and feet, where we try to get some practical application of just what it means to remember Christ, and I want to start off by saying that today is a very special day for my son Benjamin. He's in Iowa right now representing an organization called Athletes Serving Athletes, and he and his adopted son Shane are taking part in a national race, actually it's a triathlon, but he's going to be doing the marathon part of it. Ben's going to be running 26 miles while pushing Shane in a specially modified three-wheeled racing

wheelchair. You see some pictures there, that's Shane. They heard about this race, they've been doing this for a while now. Ben's done a couple of half marathons with Shane. Shane sits right in the front, and he catches all the bugs and all of the other stuff, but -- so they applied for this triathlon, they put together a team, put together, raised \$7,000, rented a Winnebago and drove out to Iowa for this national meet. And today's the day that they race. This is Shane getting his carb-loading, as Ken was speaking about. Shane is 20, 20 years old, he has Duchenne's Muscular Dystrophy which is the worst kind that you could have. He's not expected to make it to his 30s. There are very, very few who ever do. Shane started out as a youngster playing baseball and has gotten to the point now where he is completely paralyzed except for his mouth and a little movement in his fingers. Ben takes complete care of him. He cares for him from showers to the toilet to getting him ready for school every day, and he wants him to have as good an experience as he could possibly have with the remaining time he has here on earth. He speaks to him a great deal about heaven and what's in store, and Shane is ready for that. But I mention Ben, I'm mentioning Ben not just to brag, which I am obviously doing anyway, but to point out some of the things that God has taught me through my son Ben. Most of you know that Ben and his brother Dan were born eight weeks premature, two-and-a-half-pound preemies. They had a real struggle going

through school. There just was a lot of connections that just weren't made, and they worked like crazy to get C's and D's and to finally pass. But one thing that stood out about them, one thing that we did from the day that they were as little boys up until the time that they left home is we prayed every single day that God would give them wisdom. And one thing that is astounding about my boys Dan and Ben is they have extraordinary spiritual wisdom. Ben has been the director of Young Life's Capernaum Project in Baltimore, he's stepping down from that, he wants to expand the role, he wants to do some other things with the handicapped in the Baltimore area. But I speak to Ben about -- usually about two times a week, and he's -- we're on the phone all the time. We talk about the ups and the downs, the highs and the lows of marriage and having four special needs kids, which is an incredibly difficult thing, and he speaks about the frustrations that he has. The one thing that I wanted to bring out that Ben has taught me and schooled me and I would say instructed me in, is the art of knowing where your heart is. You know, if I've heard Ben say it once, I think I've heard him say it a hundred times, "Dad, I know my heart's not right." He's the one who would say that all the time. And whether it's praying, whether it's worshipping or reading God's word, Ben knows when his heart is not right. He knows what these religious leaders had no clue about, and it has given him incredible insight and wisdom in living his life for the kingdom.

He frequently asks me to pray for the state of his heart because he knows that it's not healthy, or when he knows that it's not healthy.

And our lesson for today really is a lesson in discerning what spiritual heart health is. You see, every one of us has desperately wicked hearts. We all do. They're desperately wicked and deceitful above all else. But we all have a great God, a wonderful, glorious God, who loves us in spite of those hearts, and he wants nothing more than to cleanse us of the unrighteousness and to create in us a clean heart and to renew in us a steadfast spirit, but again, all we have to do is ask. And so this morning, I want to collectively ask for each of us.

Father, I just come before you this day and I acknowledge we are forewarned and somewhat taken aback by reading in your word about the hardness and the blindness and the deafness of these religious leaders, and we see the warning there. If we don't tend to our hearts, they can become hardened and they can blind our eyes and stop our ears and make it impossible for us to hear. Father, I pray not that I would have a flawless and perfect heart but that you would create in me a clean heart. I pray for each and every person sitting here in this congregation that they, too, would seek out that same prayer, that they would ask for the heart that only

you can supply. I pray that each and every one of us would pray that God would renew a steadfast spirit within each of us because we can't on our own. You've given us the task to be the word in this world. We don't have the ability to do that, but you have the ability to do that, and you delight in doing that if we would but ask, and so Father, on behalf of his congregation, I ask, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.