

Love in Spite of Our Sin

The Gospel – Greatest Love Story

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Bible Text: Romans 1:18

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We've all been saddened by the events the past several months in Ferguson, Missouri. Whatever your view might be of the shooting death of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson or the various responses by the demonstrators or of the prosecutor, etc. etc., I think we would all agree on this: this occasion is sad, sad for a myriad of reasons. It's deserving of our prayers for every person involved. It's deserving of our prayers for our entire nation as we wrestle with important questions that have surfaced again these past few months. If you watched the prosecutor's statement on Monday night, one aspect that stood out was the power and primacy of evidence. If I understood his statements correctly, they purposely did not want any of the physical evidence to be disseminated by the media until they first had that opportunity to speak to the so-called eyewitnesses because one of the ways you can evaluate the truthfulness of their testimony was then to compare it to the physical evidence. So those who said that Officer Wilson shot Michael Brown in the back as he was running away were disproven by the fact that there were no bullet wounds in his back. Or those who said that Officer Wilson's eye socket was dislocated by Michael Brown were disproven because the pictures taken after the incident did not corroborate that kind of injury. Those who said that Michael Brown did not enter Officer Wilson's police car were disproven because Brown's DNA was found inside the police car and on Wilson's uniform. Those who said that Michael Brown did not turn around and come back toward Officer Wilson were disproven because of the location of the blood on the street.

No, I'm not taking a position this morning on whether the shooting was justified or not. I'm not taking a position on whether the investigation was handled properly or not. Of course, I have my own opinions personally on that because if you've been around this church for any period of time, you know I have an opinion on everything. Frankly, I have an opinion on the outfit you're wearing right now that I have to look at for the next 40 minutes. I'd be happy to share that with you if you want it so I have opinions. I have opinions but that's not the point, there's room in a church family for a lot of views on a set of issues like these, right? But I would like us to think this morning about the power and the primacy of evidence, of proof, of demonstration. We all know it's one thing to say something. You can say whatever you want, but it's an entirely different issue if you have the ability to prove it; if you can somehow demonstrate the truthfulness of what's being said.

We experienced that 24 years ago when we put together our first Living Nativity. Arvid Olson was in charge of designing the sets and we didn't want it to be small. We just didn't. We wanted the energy and the resources we put into that presentation to be commensurate with our level of excitement and appreciation for the message so we decided to go large. That's what we did, especially in the design of Bethlehem. So we designed a wall to run along the parking lot of the State Road 26 end of our eastside campus. It was going to be 80 feet long and at places, 24 feet tall. The challenge was we had to paint the bulk of that set in warmer weather and so we didn't build the set and then paint it, we painted the individual pieces and then we put it all together at the very end. Some of our church members were there 24 years ago and you remember what those work nights and those workdays were like. We had a brown metal storage barn at the time and it was located out where about our concession building on our State Road 26 east campus is today. But you'd go in night after night or day after day, the lumber yard would have delivered another set of those 4 x 8 sheets of plywood. Arvid would have an overhead projector set up and I realize some of you have no idea what an overhead projector is, Google it on your smart phone and it will give you a little picture. You'd shine an image on the sheet of plywood in all sorts of crazy shapes and then essentially you would make a big paint by number project out of your particular sheet. There would be all these different colors, all these different shapes, these specialty paint treatments. You'd paint it one color and then Arvid would give you this other color of paint and have you go and splatter it on what you had just painted. So we started asking Arvid, "How is this Bethlehem? How do these shapes have anything to do with anything? These colors are all clashing. This is going to be one hot mess for sure." Of course, Arvid just smiled and told us to trust him. I have no idea where he got that phrase from but just trust him, it was all going to work out. But it was pretty hard to believe, honestly, until set up day which in that case, could have also been called Demonstration Day or Proof Day or Evidence Day or maybe Arvid's Not as Big a Goof as We Thought Day. You pick whichever one you think is best. We got there early in the morning and we erected this huge wall of scaffolding. Anybody here remember that? Oh my. Then we lashed 2 x 4s to the scaffolding for support. Then we started placing those random sheets that we had been painting all these months before on to the proper place on the wall and as the day wore on, the disparaged shapes started coming together to make a beautiful scene. Those colors that seemed to clash blended together into a stunning set. The point I'm making is this: Arvid could have told us all day long it's going to be fine when it's done but the real proof came when he demonstrated it. I want you to think about the power of evidence; the power of proving something; the power of a demonstration. Friends, I would suggest to you this morning that's exactly what God did at Christmas time.

With that in mind, please open your Bible now to Romans 5. That's on page 121 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning. This morning we're moving into our Christmas series which we have entitled "The Gospel – The Greatest Love Story Ever Told." The reason for that particular emphasis is we thought it would dovetail nicely with our annual theme this year of "Loving Our Neighbors." We've been talking about that all year long and working on the matter of loving our neighbors from a variety of perspectives all year. We were able, praise God, to

rejoice last Sunday night at our Stewardship celebration as we rejoiced in all the different ways that by the grace of God we were able to actually advance in that very matter of loving our neighbors. So that's been very, very important to us this year. Well, let me remind you of this: no question about the fact that we're going to have significant opportunities to love our neighbors and love our friends for the remainder of this year whether it be through all of the great Christmas outreach ministries that we're about to participate in together or whether we're talking about you individually in that office party, oh my, or all the Christmas family gatherings, etc. etc. etc. Well, hopefully we're going to hit the tape of 2015 going about 100 miles an hour as we end this year strongly by loving our neighbors, even during the Christmas season. Do you want to do that? I hope you do.

One way to ensure that that happens is by going back to the foundation of our love for others which is God's love for us. So on several Sunday mornings along with Christmas eve at both of our campuses for the first time this year, we're going to talk about the Gospel, the greatest love story ever told and this morning we want to kick all of that off by studying Romans 5:8 which speaks about love in spite of our sin. I'm going to begin reading this great chapter in Romans 5:1 where Paul says,

1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, [that's all great news, huh? Amen to that.] 2 through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

Spoiler alert: that verse actually gives you a hint into next year's theme. We'll get to that on another Sunday.

3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, [wow, really?] knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint,

There are going to be people who are listening to this message today who are going through incredibly deep water, yet that statement is still true,

hope does not disappoint, [why?] because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. 6 For while we were still [what?] helpless, at the right time Christ died for the [whom?] ungodly. 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. 11 And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation. 12

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

We're talking this morning about love in spite of our sin and with the time we have remaining, let's think about three truths about God's love for us. Well, no question about the fact that it starts right here: our need for God's love is great. Do you agree with that? Really, really, really great. In fact, I can't think of a more appropriate way to begin the Christmas season than having a frank reminder about the depth of mankind's depravity and our utter need for a Savior and Redeemer from heaven. I realize you might say, "Well, Merry Christmas to you too, Pastor Viars." Well, without understanding and believing that, the utter depravity of man, not just that person of a particular ethnicity or that person of a particular position, all of us, without a frank reminder of the depravity of man, the message of Christmas is just bland and lifeless. Do you realize that? About as tasty as last year's leftover fruitcake.

We're reading from the most comprehensive theological treatment of any place in the New Testament. I really think this: not long after a person becomes a follower of Jesus Christ, you need to develop a working knowledge of the book of Romans, it's just that important. Students of Scripture believe that this book was written around A.D. 57 at the end of Paul's third missionary journey and you can check this out later but if you look at the details enumerated in chapter 15 in verses 22 to 27 of the book of Romans, you'll find that Paul has three destinations in mind: Jerusalem and then Rome to whom he's writing right now and then to Spain. Why was that important? Well, the reason Jerusalem was on his mind is because of a detail we studied last Sunday: there was a famine in Jerusalem and so the Gentile churches had been taking up a love offering to be a blessing to their Jewish brothers and sisters. You see, just like we have unresolved racial tension in our country, that was certainly true in the early church because God was seeking to graft Jews and Gentiles together through their common faith in the shed blood of Christ and while I don't want to minimize what's occurring in Ferguson, Missouri or around our country, please understand contextually that the task of bringing Jews and Gentiles together into a loving body of believers, that was at least as challenging as anything that we're facing today.

So our sovereign God allowed the Jewish believers to face a famine so their Gentile brothers and sisters could show their love to them not just by talking about it but by opening up their wallets and doing something about it. In fact, Paul said it in the book of 2 Corinthians that we studied last week, you can prove, not talk about, you can demonstrate, prove, give evidence of the sincerity of your love by the way you give financially for your Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Well now, Paul's in the process of delivering that completed offering to the Christians in Jerusalem and then he intends to visit them in Rome, the people he's writing to now and then head off to Spain. One of the most important aspects of bringing unity to any group of people is helping us understand the essential problem that causes division and disharmony. What is that? Well, it's the pride and the sinfulness of our own hearts. Have we all got that? If we didn't elevate ourselves so highly and ignore the ways that we need to change and blame our problems on everybody else, we'd have far less motivation and justification for judging others and

criticizing others and separating ourselves from people who look different than us. So Paul begins the book of Romans with an absolute demolition of the self-righteous pride of man when he says this, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness," not just that of the Jews or that of the Gentiles, "all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." I would encourage you to have a working outline of the book of Romans. You say, "Seriously, you want me to have a working outline?" Yes, seriously. If you can memorize the names of the people on "Dancing with the Goofs," you can memorize a...I don't know why I have a gland that secretes anti-"Dancing with the Stars" hormone but anyway, you can remember a simple outline from the book of Romans.

There are lots of them out there. Here's one from John MacArthur's study Bible that I think is very helpful. The book of Romans starts by talking about condemnation, the need of God's righteousness, but it's very important to understand the flow of thought in the book. Paul talks about unrighteous Gentiles. Everybody would agree with that, but then, boom! he follows it up with a discussion of unrighteous Jews. Wow, that would have been a surprise. Then in case we didn't get the message, he actually speaks about unrighteous mankind. All human beings stand equally condemned before a holy God. Then, praise the Lord, he talks about justification. So it's not just condemnation, it's justification, the possibility of actually being forgiven of your sin and receiving a righteousness that was not your own. Then sanctification, the possibility of changing as a result. Then restoration, a discussion about what's going to happen with God's chosen nation. Then application, if you have really received Christ as Savior and Lord, how is that going to affect the way you live in response to his grace.

Now, remember we always interpret the Bible in light of its original context. Some of this would've been both amazing and offensive to Paul's original readers. It's one thing to talk about the Gentiles being sinful and separated from a holy God and therefore deserving of his wrath but in the next breath to say the same thing about Jews? Even those who might have been religious as all get out and following all sorts of religious rules and regulations, believing those human works could somehow cover or atone for their sin? To suggest that they were equally under the wrath of God and in need of his grace would have been stunning. But friends, if that's what the evidence suggests, isn't that what we always hear? "Follow the evidence wherever it leads." If that's true, then the most loving thing is to have it pointed out, especially if there's a solution involved after the acknowledgment is made.

So Paul makes it clear, our need for God's love is great. Did you notice, were you carefully following along as I was reading from the Bible? Did you notice the different words that were used to describe our condition apart from Christ? Here's one of them: it said that we were helpless, Romans 5:6. The Greek word "astheneo, helpless." Here's a couple of other places in the Bible that use that exact same word but translate it different than "helpless" in English just to help us to get a feel for what exactly is Paul saying. See if you can pick out the use. One's in Mark 14:38, "Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." What do you think is "astheneo" there, translated as "helpless" in Romans 15? Where do you think it is

there? Yeah, the word "weak." Or another one, same Greek word, different English translation, Luke 10, "Heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'" Where do you think the word is there? Yeah clearly, "sick." Here's another fascinating use in 2 Corinthians 10:10, "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.'" Which do you think is the word "astheneo"? You actually have a couple of guesses there, don't you? It's "unimpressive." Now, what is Paul's saying? Think about your ability to overcome temptation in your own strength; to handle trials in your own strength; to know absolute truth in your own strength; to have an answer for the fear of death in your own strength and on and on and on. Where does that really leave us if we're going to be honest? The answer is: astheneo, helpless, weak, sick and unimpressive. It's the polar opposite of believing we're all that and a bag of chips which is what leads to prejudice to begin with.

You go further down the list, the more comprehensive the indictment becomes. Paul speaks about our being ungodly. For a while "we were still helpless," astheneo, "at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly." Have you ever stopped and thought about exactly what that word means? That little preposition "un," really powerful in this particular conceptualization. Think about everything you love about God: his beautiful character; his marvelous works. Apart from Christ, you are un-that, right? By the way, I realize someone might say, "Pastor Viars, be careful. There could be children in the services listening to all of this. You'll make them feel badly about their wonderful little selves and the petals of their flowers will start to fold back inside. They won't be motivated to reach inside and get another scoop of their wonderfulness." You were thinking that, weren't you? I know. I can read your mind. Well, can you stomach another "back in the old days" comment? You realize your pastor is getting old and so you're going to hear a lot more of this reminiscing and, "Back in the old days." Just kind of get ready for that. Well, back in the old days, did you know students in public schools in the early history of our country were actually taught the alphabet from a book called, the McGuffey Reader and the way they learned their alphabet was there was a rhyme that went along with every letter to help them remember the letter and also learn an important truth about themselves. Do you know what the statement was for the letter "A" in the McGuffey Reader? Here's what it was: "In Adam's fall, we sinned all," and I agree. Apparently our forefathers thought it was wise to help children understand their position in God's world sooner than later. It's not like they buried that on "X" or "Z." "A," little ones and bigguns: "In Adam's fall, we sinned all."

So we were helpless. We were ungodly. We were sinners. It's the Greek word "hamartia," very crucial theologically. It means "missing the mark." What mark? The mark of God's holiness. Have we all figured out theologically that God does not grade on a curve? It's like, "Well, I'm better than somebody else. I'm a pretty good guy. Blah blah blah." No, the comparison is to the holiness of God and we miss the mark. I'm amazed when I hear college students say things like, "Well, last week's quiz of 50 questions, I only got 16 right but the good news is, I still got an 'A' because no one else did any better." Well, I guess that's good until the day comes that you actually need to know the information requested in the other 34 questions that you missed and still received an "A." I mean, try

that out with your boss, "You know, I know I just messed up that project because I never really understood the concepts but I got an 'A' on the quiz because my professor graded on a curve." Well, God's standard is his own holiness and we would want it to be, wouldn't we? And compared to that, we all hamartia, we all miss the mark. And even if we didn't miss it as often as someone else, I hope you're not taking any consolation in that, or we didn't miss it as badly as we might have, we still miss the mark.

Paul goes on and says that we are deserving of the wrath of God. Romans 5:9, "having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." And I realize you might say, "This would not be very popular in our culture." Do you understand that I don't sit around and try to figure out what's going to be popular in our culture, I sit around and figure out what does the Bible say. I'm an expository teacher of Scripture and this is exactly what this text has to say, "that apart from Christ, all men are deserving of the wrath of God." It's also a good place to point out that there is no such thing as an Old Testament God and a New Testament one. You know that I am a pretty mild-mannered fellow, have you noticed that over the years? It takes a lot to get me wound up but it I'll tell you, if I ever hear you say in casual conversation or anywhere else, "There was an Old Testament God and there's a New Testament God," our next few minutes together will probably not be very pleasant. You don't want to believe that is what I'm saying. That's simply not true. There is wrath in the New Testament like here and plenty of grace in the Old. That's why Paul even referred to us in Ephesians 2:3 as "by nature children of wrath, even the rest." That made us God's enemies, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God," and that's not enemies of one another, it's enemies of God.

Now, I realize you might say, "This is a pretty harsh diagnosis." It is. It is, but if it's true, it's in our best interest to hear it, right? When you go to the doctor, what you want above all else is for a doctor to be able to give you the correct diagnosis and, of course, everyone always hopes it's nothing serious but if it is serious, the most unloving thing that a doctor could ever do is to keep the truth from you or make it sound like it's not that bad. You want it straight, don't you? And even if it hurts and especially if there is a treatment plan that can successfully cure the disease if you get on it right away. That's the point, our need and that's what I'm talking to you about right now: our need for God's love is great because in our own flesh, we were helpless, we were ungodly, we were sinners, we were deserving of God's wrath, we were positioned as his enemies. Here's the amazing thing: God knows all of that and more. Do you think this sermon is any surprise to the God of heaven? No, he knows all of that and more in ways and to degrees that we could not even begin to articulate this morning and yet the message of Scripture is: God loves us anyway. Please don't ever forget the "anyway." God loves us anyway not because of anything he sees in us but because it's consistent with his marvelous character to practice that kind of initiatory love. I realize someone might say, "Well, we're going to have to see some evidence of that. He's going to have to prove that. He's going to have to demonstrate that." Friends, that's the beauty of the Gospel. Yes, our need for God's love is great but the demonstration of God's love is unmistakable. Paul says, "He did this at the perfect time while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly." One commentator said this, "Not only was it the right time in terms of the sweep of

history, but it was the right time in the sense that we were powerless to break the chains of sin." Do you agree? "We were unable to help ourselves. Bound by sin and destined for an eternity apart from God, no amount of struggle could free us from condemnation. It was for us the right time for Christ's atoning death."

You see, you could think about this demonstration like a fireworks display. That's the kind of demonstrations that we're discussing this morning. Why do they have a fireworks demonstration after dark? Well, to provide the best backdrop for the beauty and brilliance of the light and I'm suggesting that the more we understand our sin and our helplessness and our misery, our separation from God, the more we will be in awe at the brilliant display of God's love for us anyway. You know what it's like on those July 4th summer nights when you go with your family to the fireworks and you're counting down the minutes until it actually becomes dark and then off goes the display. What is the operative response of the crowd? I could hear that from Faith West. That's exactly right, "Oooo. Ah. Wow." No question about that. Can you imagine somebody coming up during that fireworks display and saying, "You know, I don't think there's going to be any fireworks tonight." Or, "I don't think the colors will be that spectacular." You'd say, "What are you talking about? Look at the proof. Look at the display. Look at the evidence. Look at the demonstration." You see, there's no doubting God's love now. It was the perfect time.

It was the perfect payment. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Verse 9, "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." I would just ask you this morning: friend, do you consider the songs that we were singing this morning about the blood of Jesus Christ, do you consider the blood of Christ to be precious? Do you? Do you understand that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin? That's why, by the way, the virgin birth is so important. That's how Romans 5:12, the last verse I read in the text, that's how it fits into this discussion. Our sin nature is transmitted through the procreation process. There had to be a way for Jesus to become a man yet without being tainted by original sin. The only way that could be accomplished was through a virgin conception, meaning our Lord could make the perfect payment. I realize someone might say, "You know, this sounds more like an Easter message than it does a Christmas message." Well, there's a sense in which every Christmas message should also be an Easter message. In fact, even Mary understood that. Do you remember what she said even at the announcement of the birth of Christ? She said, "My soul exalts the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in," who? "In God my Savior." By the way, that's one of the many reasons we would never worship Mary and why she would not have wanted to be worshiped. She understood that she was cursed by sin and in need of a Savior just like everyone else and even at the announcement of her son's birth, it was always in the shadow of the cross.

That makes all of this the perfect demonstration, "for one will hardly die for a righteous man," that's true, huh? If I asked you right now, "Make a list of the number of people you would be willing to die for," you could probably do that on the back of a bubblegum wrapper, right? I mean, it wouldn't take very long before you would say, "Seriously?" Yet this Scripture says that, "though perhaps for a good man someone might dare to die. But

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Think about wherever you are on the Wilson/Brown thing, who you think is guilty and maybe you've spent a lot of time thinking about how bad that person is and how much better you are than them. Would you die for them? God was willing to die for the sin of man and just like the Michael Brown trial, people can say or believe whatever they want but the truthfulness of their belief has to be corroborated by the evidence. That's what Paul meant by using this word "demonstrate." It literally means "to provide evidence of a personal characteristic or claim through action." If anyone needs proof of God's love, look no further than the manger. Look no further than the cross. Look no further than the empty tomb. God didn't love us because of who we were, he loved us in spite. That's the kind of love we're talking about: in spite of who we were.

Now in a minute I want to land this plane by talking about some of the effects but before we do that, let's try to tie what I'm talking about this morning from this great passage both to our annual theme, "Loving Our Neighbors," and also to the many opportunities we're going to have in Christmas outreach ministry as a church and in opportunities to be around others in the things you'll do for Christmas. How do we tie all of this together? Several upshots, one of them is this: friend, if you've never accepted the gift of God's love, I want to urge you to do that today and my guess is that I will be speaking to some persons who have believed that you don't need a Savior because you're pretty good already and so your own work, maybe you've never heard the Gospel before, your own work, God grades on a curve and your surely better than fill-in-the-blank. So because of that, you are going to at your death stand before God and present to him all of your good deeds and you're going to earn your way to heaven on your own. Listen, just because somebody said that Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown in the back doesn't mean he did and just because somebody believes that God will grade on a curve, doesn't mean he will. I realize you might say, "Well, this message has made me kind of uncomfortable." That was exactly the point. If that's what it takes to knock us off our self-righteous pedestal so we'll be in a position as a result of thinking about how dark the backdrop of our own depravity is, how much we needed the light of God's love, if it took some being uncomfortable in order to make that decision, then so be it. So I would encourage you while you have the opportunity to think about the solution to the problem, to acknowledge your sin and place your faith and trust in Christ.

Friend, I also want to encourage you to do this: to zealously avoid our world's tendency to doggedly refuse to call sin sin. It's amazing how this culture will not just call it what it is and I could illustrate that all day long. But here's a couple of contemporary examples: one was during the trial and subsequent suicide of Cody Cousins, a young man who ruthlessly murdered Andrew Boldt right over on the Purdue campus. This was from the Journal and Courier, our local newspaper which said this,

"Cousins was sentenced Sept. 19 in a hearing that captivated those in attendance. Various mental health professionals shared differing views on Cousins' mental state."

Well, if they're professionals, why were there so many different views?

"One said Cousins suffered from schizophrenia leading up to and during the murder; another said he had bipolar disorder and did not show symptoms at the time of the killing."

Well, that's kind of interesting, one says it's schizophrenia and he was acting off of that and the other said he had bipolar but he wasn't. That's a bit confusing. The article goes on to say,

"When Cousins finally spoke — the first time the public heard his voice — people gathered in the packed courtroom were eager to hear his rationalization for what Dr. Elmo Griggs, who has conducted more than 10,000 autopsies, characterized as 'the worst homicide I've ever seen.'" Right here at Purdue. "In his statement, Cousins claimed he used his knowledge of mental health to fake a mental illness. 'I killed Andrew Boldt because I wanted to, and I do what I want,' Cousins said." Then this, "Steven Berger, a Wabash Valley Alliance staff psychiatrist who evaluated Cousins and testified during the trial, said 'there are two ways to make sense of any suicide.' Cousins either killed himself due to his mental illness or simply decided to kill himself without any psychological symptoms involved, Berger said. Berger testified that Cousins suffered from a mental illness but that it didn't play a part in the murder. The same could have happened in the case of Cousins' decision to kill himself."

Well, with all due respect, suggesting he may have had various unprovable psychiatric diseases that may or may not have contributed to his choices is not particularly helpful. It's like the doctor saying, "You may or may not have cancer and if you do, your cancer may or may not be causing your symptoms." You feel like saying, "I may or may not be paying my bill." I'm not talking about any of our church's doctors, by the way, I'm talking about all those other bad guys. But here's what I'm saying: friends, if we cannot bring ourselves to calling Cody Cousins' choices as being ungodly and sinful and deserving of God's wrath, what's the likelihood we'll ever accept God's diagnosis for any human being including ourselves? I'm saying, without the dark background of God's truth, the brilliance of God's love is diminished.

There has been a ton of ink spilled on the Ferguson Missouri issue. The most helpful article that I have read on that actually came from the hand of an NFL football player. Maybe you heard this or saw this. He posted it on his Facebook page. Benjamin Watson who plays for the New Orleans Saints. Let me just read a bit from what he said about all of this.

"At some point while I was playing or preparing to play Monday Night Football, the news broke about the Ferguson Decision. After trying to figure out how I felt, I decided to write it down. Here are my thoughts:

I'M ANGRY because the stories of injustice that have been passed down for generations seem to be continuing before our very eyes.

I'M FRUSTRATED, because pop culture, music and movies glorify these types of police citizen altercations and promote an invincible attitude that continues to get young men killed in real life.

I'M FEARFUL because in the back of my mind I know that although I'm a law abiding citizen I could still be looked upon as a 'threat.'

I'M EMBARRASSED because the looting, violent protests, and law breaking only confirm, and in the minds of many, validate, the stereotypes.

I'M SAD, because another young life was lost from his family, the racial divide has widened, a community is in shambles.

I'M SYMPATHETIC, because I wasn't there so I don't know exactly what happened. Maybe Darren Wilson acted within his rights and duty as an officer of the law and killed Michael Brown in self defense like any of us would in the circumstance. Now he has to fear the backlash against himself.

I'M OFFENDED, because of the insulting comments I've seen that are not only insensitive but dismissive to the painful experiences of others.

I'M CONFUSED, because I don't know why it's so hard to obey a policeman. You will not win!!! And I don't know why some policeman abuse their power. Power is a responsibility, not a weapon to brandish and lord over the populace.

I'M INTROSPECTIVE, because sometimes I want to take 'our' side [he's an African American gentleman] without looking at the facts in situations like these.

I'M HOPELESS, because I've lived long enough to expect things like this to continue to happen.

I'M HOPEFUL, because I know that while we still have race issues in America, we enjoy a much different normal than those of our parents and grandparents."

And then the last paragraph and by far the one that was most stunning, he said,

"I'M ENCOURAGED, because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem."

An NFL football players said that. Then he went on to say this,

"SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse our authority. SIN is the reason we are racist, prejudiced and lie to cover for our own. SIN is the reason we riot, loot and burn. BUT I'M ENCOURAGED because God has provided a solution for sin through the his son Jesus and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being. The cure for the Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner tragedies is not education or exposure. It's the Gospel. So, finally, I'M ENCOURAGED because the Gospel gives mankind hope."

There is a football player from appropriately, I think, the New Orleans Saints, who has such a saintly history, by the way. There is a football player willing to call sin sin. If he's willing to do that, I think you and I ought to do that ourselves starting with our own sin.

I also would suggest to you that as we're thinking about this backdrop of the depravity of man as we begin our Christmas season, I hope we'll never lose our sense of awe at God's marvelous demonstration. For those of you who have been part of our church for over a year, do you remember the first time you saw the Living Nativity? Do you remember the awe that it struck in your heart? For me that was with Pastor Goode and Arvid Olson, actually 25 years ago when we were down in Slidell, Louisiana looking at it at the church that we took this concept from. Sure, I knew the story, it's not like anything that was being illustrated was new but seeing it in that fashion, it just deepened my appreciation for the Gospel. There have been a number of times over the years as I've been involved in the Nativity that I would walk around during a time that I did not have a responsibility and just look at those sets, look at the message and just stand in awe. Listen, some of us have been doing this for a long time. I hope we'll never lose the awe and I hope even as we're going back out to be with the camels or back out to be with the sheep or back out to scene 5 Bethlehem, I hope we'll think in our hearts, "Regardless of how many times I have done this, I want to do my very best because it's highly likely that someone's going to be coming through this and hearing the Gospel for the very first time."

I also would say this to us: because God loves us in spite of our sin we have the privilege of doing the same for others. Listen, as you go to this office party, as you go to the family gathering with Uncle So-and-so, can you work as hard as possible not to be judgmental? Not to look down on them? Can I encourage you to work as hard as you possibly can at loving them anyway? If God could do that for you, you can do that for others. And as you're participating in some of our Christmas ministries, listen, we're going to have a bunch of people who are going to be on our campuses and we're going to have a bunch of opportunities to rub shoulders with people who aren't quite yet followers of Jesus Christ. Who knows what God is going to do.

It's like the night the guy came to the Living Nativity, he was stark raving drunk. There is no question about that, I mean, he was over the top big time. It was back when we had so

many traffic jams that we had policemen out here directing the traffic and all of that kind of thing and so somehow he got in. He wasn't even going to the Nativity, he was going down State Road 26 but he saw all these lights and the lights confused him and the police and so he turned into the church and then we had all these different lights confusing the fire out of a guy who was drunk, directing him here, directing him here and finally he got to the place where you actually rolled down your window and someone from the church speaks to him and he goes, "I don't know why I'm here. That policeman told me that and God told me that," and then threw a few f-bombs along and all the rest. What a great opportunity to love somebody, huh? And a great opportunity to get somebody off the highway. But the bottom line is, which is a secondary purpose of the Living Nativity, of course, but let's love every person that God brings. You know, you might be working in Christmas for Everyone and you might come across someone who is gaming the system, it happens. So all of a sudden you're serving someone who drove to Christmas for Everyone in a better car than yours and is looking on a cellphone that's newer than yours. Can I encourage you not to let one episode like that make you cynical and unloving to every person who is really genuinely in need and let's work as hard as we can privately and as a church in loving persons anyway.

Well, let me wrap up by talking about the effects. Embracing this message brings with it a world of blessings: we are justified by his blood; we're saved from the wrath of God; we're reconciled to God through the death of his Son; we shall be saved by his life; and we exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. You see, just follow the evidence wherever it leads. That's never been truer than the story of Christmas so, friend, can we be honest about the darkness of the backdrop? Let's be amazed by the brilliance of God's love for us anyway and let's look for opportunities to love our neighbors in a similar fashion.

Would you stand with me for prayer?

Father in heaven, thank you for the opportunity to hear this frank description of our condition contrasted to the marvel of your love and, Father, I pray that that would impact us and would impact the way that we treat others. We ask for your help in Christ's name. Amen.