

LOVE ABOVE ALL (2)

Lebron James has just broken the record for career points in the NBA.

He is now the highest scorer for Lifetime Achievement

and to think that he is still a very active player

and that he is bound to just go higher.

The past record held by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar stood for almost 40 years, apparently unreachable.

But then, just a few playing days ago, James broke it.

It proves the adage that records are made to be broken.

One day, someone will break James' record.

And I have often been asked,

who do I consider the GOAT?

GOAT standing for Greatest of All Time.

Well, if I am asked that question,

often the choices only are Jordan, Kobe Bryant or Lebron James.

I have another name in mind,

but if I were to choose among those three based on statistics,

Lebron James should be it.

Statistics-wise, he is higher than most.

But there are intangibles of the game,

meaning those that are not recorded by statistics.

And from those intangibles, I still go for Jordan.

Jordan is a good teammate.

Lebron James open-schools his teammates.

But there are things in the church that are quantifiable

and they are important, such as attendance.

You can know when a person, when a Christian,

when a member is attending consistently every Sunday.

But at the same time, there are many intangibles in church life and the exercise of graces.

They have many intangibles and of all the graces,

the grace of love probably has most of the intangibles,

those that you cannot measure by way of statistical record

or by counting or by quantifying.

And whenever I discourse on love,

as I have said, whether I speak of God's love or Christian love,

I find it necessary to make a negation

because it is often thought of just like the common notion of love today,

especially in this month of February.

Christian love, I must insist, is not the sentimental emotion

that it has become in the average notion.

It is a grace, a product of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a true believer.

I'm not saying that it is without emotion,
but it transcends and it is able to be above emotion
because it is a matter of principle.

It is a matter of character.

And one thing that is underscored in the New Testament,
as far as love is compared to other graces,
love is given the chief of ranking.

If we rank the graces that Christians should all exercise,
love is the greatest of them.

Those are the exact words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, 13.

And where I can use that passage
and other several New Testament passages that rank love as superior,
but I'm using in a two-week message, which began last week,
a simple text from 1 Peter.

And I would invite you again to turn to 1 Peter 1.

We are concentrating on verse 8,
but I'll back off to verse 7 just to get the immediate context.

1 Peter 4, verses 7 and 8.

The end of all things is at hand.

Therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded
for the sake of your prayers.

Verse 8, above all, keep loving one another earnestly
since love covers a multitude of sins.

So loving one another, if you are writing to persecuted Christians,
may not immediately be a message that you would expect from the Apostle Peter.

Instead, Apostle Peter does point to the Lord Jesus Christ
as an example of endurance,
and he has left us an example to follow his steps.

That is something that Peter emphasizes.

But one thing that we cannot avoid is his emphasis as well
on loving one another among persecuted Christians,
the more they need that bond, that knit together of love.

And what Peter tells us here,
or the words that stand out from his brief exhortation,
is that this loving one another earnestly is above all.

And as I have explained, while sometimes above all
the Greek can be used in a sequential sense,
that is, it is first before others,
that does not apply here in terms of experience of graces.

Love is not first. Faith is first.

You must first believe in the Lord Jesus Christ
before you can experience the blessings of salvation
and the graces that accompany the blessings of salvation.

You must become a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that is a question that many of you still have to answer very directly.
And personally, have you become a believer in Christ?
Have you come to the point of faith?
Do not expect that because you have some sense of love to God,
you are a Christian because love is not a saving grace.
It is faith that is used as an instrument of saving those who are lost.
So in terms of sequence, love is not first.
So what does Peter mean by above all,
keep loving one another earnestly?
I explained that it means ranking.
In terms of ranking, in terms of what defines the rest,
it is love that defines the other graces.
And this is something that must be stressed in a community
or in a relationship where it is easy to replace love with something else.
Parents may say they provide for their children
and that is for them the love that they have for their children,
or they think that they just let their children be
in terms of giving them independence
and they think that that is love.
Now that kind of mistake happens so many times in families,
but it also happens in the church
where love can be replaced by other things we do for the saints.
And that is why Peter makes it very clear
Christian love ranks above all as characterizing the bond of brethren.
Now from the ranking of love as chief among Christian graces,
Peter proceeds to its foremost challenge.
It is that familiar language.
Love covers a multitude of sins.
Familiar does not mean clear and easy.
As a matter of fact, I confess,
I found it personally taxing to interpret this text.
I found myself over the years like a pendulum going to one position
and then to its opposite and back again
because it is a very challenging text to interpret.
But I am now settled after much labor to understand the text
and I hope by the illumination of the Holy Spirit
and I agree that it is indeed the foremost challenge,
but it may be a real challenge to understand
what it means in the first place.
So let me put it in this message.
The most challenging of Christian love
is to extend such love to sinning brethren.
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is to extend such love to sinning brethren.

To love someone you consider your friend
or even a close brother or sister, that is good,
but that will not be considered challenging.
It can even come naturally, not graciously,
or to extend love to someone from whom you profit,
spiritually or otherwise, again, that is good,
but that is not a challenge.

This is the challenge of our text.

Extend your Christian love to someone who has wronged you
and Peter says here a multitude of sins
who has wronged you many times
or who has wronged you and remains unrepentant.

That is the real challenge.

This is the reason why this clause of our text
has been liable to all kinds of misunderstanding
and I have quite a unique two points
for my exposition of this passage.

The first is beware of two interpretations.

Beware of two interpretations.

Beware of two interpretations.

The second is practice the right application.

Practice the right application.

So beware of two interpretations
and of course I mean they are wrong interpretations.

A wrong interpretation is often due to ignorance
of the rules of interpretation,

but I do not think that is the reason here

or at least to some extent it is,

but maybe the more reason why people do not fully understand
what the text is saying or what Peter is exhorting
is simply because of prejudice.

When the text you are trying to interpret
may be simple enough,

but very hard to practice, bias takes over
and that's when it begins to be very hard to interpret,
not because the statement is really hard,
but because it is hard to implement.

It is hard to practice.

That is the kind of text we are confronted with this morning.

It is liable to interpretation
that does not end up obeying what the text is saying.

So what is the text not saying?

Let me suggest two.

First, the text is not saying that love covers up

a multitude of sins.

The text is not saying that love covers up a multitude of sins and the second misreading is that the text is not saying that love takes cover from a multitude of sins.

So the difference I would make between the two is this.

Covering up is trying not to hurt the sinning.

Making cover is trying not to be hurt by the one sinning.

So the first has to do with perhaps your gentle heart.

You do not want to hurt the person who has a multitude of sins,

while the other is trying to cover yourself

so that you are insulated from the hurt

that sin administers when it happens.

So let's consider this.

The text is not saying that love covers up a multitude of sins.

To cover up means to hide like nothing happened.

It is to resort to concealment, to explain away,

to say that it doesn't matter, that sin doesn't matter

or they may even say it's not sin at all

even though it is a clear violation of God's law,

a clear violation of the word of God.

But just to have no issue, just to have no trouble,

let us just cover it up.

It is easy to see why many would resort to covering up in the name of love.

You do not want to put the offender to shame

and to call out sin for what it is may be embarrassing

to the person who sinned,

and it will put you in an awkward situation.

You do not want that.

So many resort to this rather than to the duty of love

which is to confront the sinning,

which is what biblical love demands of us.

That at least is what I know the book of Proverbs says

in chapter 27 verse 5, familiar to many of you,

better is openly rebuked than heathen love.

So what the wise man is saying is that there are those

who will hide the sin in the name of love.

So it's heathen love, but it's not biblical love.

It is not love that is of grace.

It is better for one who you may not call to be loving,

but he is actually loving more than the one who hides

by being open in his rebuke.

And that is a principle that is perpetuated in the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 13 is the love chapter as we know.

And verse 6 is often skipped.

It says love does not rejoice at wrongdoing.

So there was a time when I thought this was what it meant
not to hurt the person who sinned by not confronting him,
and yet these passages simply challenge that kind of interpretation.

By covering up sin, one is not acting in love.

That sin may be destructive of your brother.

How can you say you love him

and see him getting destroyed by that sin?

Would you consider one a good doctor who is timid
about revealing the gravity of a condition?

Well, I do not think you will resort to that kind of doctor
who is not ready to reveal because he is afraid
that he might hurt his or her patient.

But this is how many are reading this.

They are covering up sin.

And then the text is not saying that love takes cover
from a multitude of sins.

Now, covering up is trying not to hurt the offender,
but taking cover is hiding from the harm.

When you are in a military operation
and your commander suddenly yells,
take over, you know that there is an approaching threat,
maybe a firing of ammunition.

And so you take cover.

You do not want to get hurt.

And there are those who would rather not get involved at all
when there is sin in brethren, and they just avoid.

There will be a place for avoidance, as I will show.

But clear enough in the New Testament
is the fact that that cannot be the initial reaction to sin
of one who says he loves his brother or sister.

Romans 12, 18, again, is another familiar text to us.

As much as it lies in you, be at peace with all men.

So there is that realm, there is that part at least,
there is the stage when there is a sin against you
when it lies in you to make peace.

That is an extent of active quest for reconciliation.

And to take over as your instinct of reaction to sin
or even a multitude of sins is not Christian love.

We take cover because it is risky to call out sin.

It hurts, and it can hurt.

And there are many who rather would not be hurt
in fear of what the reaction might be of the offender
if you confront him and rebuke him and seek to correct him,
which is what love dictates us to do,
but we would rather take cover.

But it is not love if you do not take steps to heal
a broken relationship,
because God's reconciliation is our pattern.

What is God's reconciliation?

1 Corinthians 5.19 says, in Christ, God was reconciling
the world to himself.

And that is because one result of sin
is that we are at enmity with God.

And my friend, you may have very good disposition
towards religion, and you may be doing things
that are good for your church.

You may be faithful in your vows and your rituals
and ceremonies, but that does not diminish the fact
that you are in your sin at enmity with God,
and the one who took steps in order to reconcile
sinners to himself is God no less.

He did so in Christ.

The only way you can be reconciled with God
is not by your works, not by your religion,
not by your church, not by your morality,
but by what God has done in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But here is the issue for us, brethren.

Who is the offended party between God and the world?

The offended party is God.

The offender is the world, but who took the first step?

The first step was taken by the one offended,
and that is the pattern for us.

This is now the love that we are expected to extend
to sinning brethren, not to hover up, not to take cover.

Again, going to basketball, do you know the difference
between offensive foul and blocking foul?

Well, one thing that the referees decide
is whether the defending player has established a position,
meaning he is not moving.

He is just there in his position,
and then the offensive, by offensive I mean
the player with the ball, the offensive player
simply attacks the established position
that will be offensive foul.

But that is because the defender is willing to get hurt.
He is willing to have his body hit by the offensive player,
and that becomes an offensive foul.
The ball returns to the defending team.
Now, there are many who do not want to establish a position
when it comes to sin because it hurts.
It may injure them.
But I'm telling you again, that is not Christian love.
My challenge to you is do not take the easy cut out
from sinning brethren.
That is not the way of Christian love.
It is so unlike God's love to us,
as demonstrated in his love that sent his son for salvation.
He took the first steps.
He was the one offended,
more offended than you and I can ever be,
and offended by more people, more sinners
than you and I can ever be.
But he took the first step nonetheless,
and that first step meant giving that which is most precious
to him, his own dear son, for the salvation of the lost.
And what this text reminds us of
is that there will be sin in the church,
and there will be hurting and being hurt.
And some have advocated for a kind of church membership
that are of similar characters and personalities,
or similar status in society, according to them,
so as to avoid more tension.
But that is not the New Testament church that you read.
In the New Testament church,
the wall of partition has been broken down
so that former arch-enemies can come together
in the assembly of the church.
And it was a beautiful sight even among pagans
who wrote about them.
It is not Christian love because what Christ has done
is to die for sinners of all the world
in terms of characters, nationalities, qualities,
whatever identity.
There is no partiality,
and that should be reflected in the church.
It is easy to make a cup out from sinning brethren,
cover up or take cover,
but that is not covering a multitude of sins.

You are the sinning brother or sister.
It may be convenient for you
that there is a cup out by others,
and so you get away with it.
But you are not delivered from your responsibility
of owning your sin and seeking repair.
Do not just hope that the brethren
will take the easy way out
and you are happy enough to get away with your sin,
whether from the side of the offended
or the side of the offender.
This is not covering a multitude of sins.
There has to be a covering that is not a cover-up
nor a taking cover.
You're familiar most probably,
I have made this an illustration
about the falling out between two great preachers
of the 18th century, George Whitfield and John Wesley,
over the matter of the doctrine of election.
And while Whitfield was willing to perpetrate their friendship,
even despite the difference in their doctrinal persuasion,
Wesley began speaking against Whitfield
and the doctrine of election in public.
And what Whitfield did was to write a letter.
That letter became such a classic and a very long one.
It was published in a booklet form.
That long was Whitfield's letter.
And just the introduction will touch you.
I'm not saying that there was nothing wrong
on the part of Whitfield.
I'll say something about that in a while.
But his introduction spoke of his broken heart
that he had to do this thing to correct Wesley in his error.
He's not covering up.
Neither was he taking cover.
He was just ready to cover a multitude of sins.
And that brings me to my second point.
Practice the right application.
How do we get the right interpretation
so as to lead to the right application of love to the sinning?
Remember, covering a multitude of sins means
we extend Christian love to a sinning brother or sister.
But how do we do that?
How do we understand this text?

One way is to go back to the original citation.
Not many realize that Peter is citing a text.
And that text is in Proverbs 10 and verse 12,
which says, hatred stirs up strife.
Love covers all offenses.
Now, when you study Hebrew parallelism,
that is Hebrew poetry, you look at the parallels.
And the parallel of contrast is instructive.
For love, the opposite is hatred.
Now, here is the point.
For cover, the opposite is strife,
stirring up strife.
Strife is used for the open conflicts,
which is when what starts as personal and private
becomes public and open.
Now, that is what the wise man of Proverbs is saying.
If you have love that covers offenses,
you will not do that.
So what is the right reading of this text?
Love deals with sins of brethren within privacy
as much as able to avoid open conflicts.
Love deals with sins of brethren in privacy
as much as able to avoid open conflicts.
So this is what it means to cover a multitude of sins.
It does not mean cover it up.
It does not mean taking cover.
It means that you do not want it to break up into the open,
break out into the open.
And so you try your best to keep it private.
And let me warn you of the most common way
we fail in private correction.
And remember, this is Matthew 18, 15,
following the rules of Jesus himself
in the matter of correcting those who sin against you.
Let it be one-on-one between you and him alone.
And if you have to bring along others,
most likely those others are those who will arbitrate
between your conflicts.
But the point is that you keep it as private as you can.
The most common failure is when one simply tells others
who are not involved in the issue of conflict.
It betrays the fact that the one doing that
is not after reconciliation.
He is after sympathy.

He is looking for cacampi.
And when does one look for allies when there is a war?
In other words, this person, this Christian,
is treating the conflict immediately as war.
And war, by definition, is destroying your enemy.
But this is a conflict between loving brethren,
not how to destroy each other.
You are not to seek for allies,
but you are to seek that brother or that sister
who was offended, who has sinned,
and you need to seek reconciliation.
But instead, many resort to looking for alliances.
They are like players in a survival reality show,
you know, outwit, et cetera.
And they take secret alliances to outvote their opponents.
Then it gets worse. To put them as object of sympathy
and put the sinning brother or the offending brother
or sister in a bad light, they will make the matter public.
And with all the help today of technology and social media
and everything, websites, it is so easy to make it public.
There was a time when you have to make something public.
You go to so many people and talk to them.
And today, by a click of the mouse,
something can be sinned by millions around the world.
And the worst of it still is when they will insist
that the world is better to judge matters of church concerns.
Again, in explicit violation of the word of God.
They will say, oh, we can deal with this.
Let's call on the world.
Let's call on the world to judge in the church.
But private correction with confidentiality
is what Christ rules.
It is a lost practice today.
Today, everything must be broadcast.
And there are means to make it known to all.
But I am of the old school, which still believes in Proverbs 11, 13,
whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets.
He who is trustworthy keeps it covered.
There is your word.
To cover is to keep it secret, to keep it confidential.
It does not mean cover up.
It does not mean take over.
It means keep confidential the sins that you are seeking to correct.
And you will find how easier it is to win the offender

when corrected or confronted privately.
And so much harder when it has been made public.
And going back to the process of Matthew 18, 15,
following the interest is to keep it one on one.
And when it has to go beyond one on one,
to keep it as private as possible.
But when you have sought to correct privately,
and this is now where the challenge really comes,
and the person remains unresponsive, what now?
This is when it becomes most perplexing.
When you are dealing with sin that may not be on the level
of making it public, not censurable by the church,
what do you do?
This, I believe, is when avoidance happens on an individual level.
Titus 3, verse 10,
After warning him once and then twice,
have nothing more to do with him.
This is individual.
This is love, I say, at its brokenness.
It involves this fellowship to an extent,
but not this fellowship that is church-wide.
But it does break fellowship when someone is sinning
and keeps sinning and there is no repentance
and you're doing what you need to do in confronting,
seeking to correct, and the person does not want to be corrected.
There comes a point when you have to take the stand
that you are sinning, you are breaking fellowship,
and I cannot have pleasant fellowship
with someone who keeps sinning without repentance.
You say it not in any desire to destroy a brother or sister.
As I've said, this is love at its brokenness.
This is love that seeks not to bring an issue to open conflict.
But when the brother or sister proudly refuses that correction,
love must be able to say, I cannot treat you like you're not sinning.
The matter of keeping conflicts private as much as possible is a challenge.
It is a challenge of Christian love,
and that is what it means to cover a multitude of sins.
Going back to my basketball, the longest serving NBA coach is Jerry Sloan,
who's now retired, once coach of the Utah Jazz.
Never got a championship, but he was kept anyway.
And one of the reasons why was he would not lash at his players publicly.
He probably lashed at them in the privacy of their room,
and he would often lash at referees.
And there had been times he was ejected for lashing out at referees.

But at his players, never lashed out publicly.

That's what is asked of us.

Do not push into the public what should be confidential and private.

So my challenge, the challenge of love is seek to correct the sinning in various forms of love from reconciling to the point of avoiding if that is what will keep it private.

The idea of covering a multitude of sins is not letting go of the sins of others.

For a long time that was the position I took, just let go the sins of others, but I find it indefensible in the light of many texts of scriptures.

And I'll tell you one, James 5, 19 and 20,

if anyone wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, whoever brings back from his wandering will save his soul and will cover a multitude of sins, exact words.

What Peter says, cover a multitude of sins.

James says, cover a multitude of sins, but how?

By correcting the one who is errant, by bringing him to the path of correction.

And it is done one on one. That's covering a multitude of sins.

It is not covering up or taking cover nor letting go.

It is ready to confront and correct.

To cover a multitude of sins includes confronting, correcting, forgiving when there is repentance, and avoiding and withdrawing when there is none.

If you are in error, please realize in the church you are not being treated and you shouldn't be treated as an enemy.

You are loved.

Loved enough for someone to approach you, to correct you, and to seek to repair the relationship.

And when there has to be a withdrawal, it does not withdraw prayer.

And it's just right there in our text in verse 7 so that your prayers may not be hindered.

It is in the context of exhortation to believers that assume them to be praying.

And this is the one assurance that you are not treating the brother or sister as an enemy is that in private, without broadcasting it, in private you pray for that brother, you pray for that sister, you pray for his good, you pray for her interest.

And he doesn't know it and he may badmouth you, but it doesn't matter before God.

God knows that you are praying for him and that you are not wishing his destruction.

You keep loving him, but it is a love that will break your heart many, many times.

Because I have found that even though I have been the object of many false accusations and charges,

none stings like a brother's accusation that is false and then made public.

That hurts, that stings, but you must still love, love to the point of praying secretly, not implication, but praying for the good of the one who has hurt you.

If you are not responsive to correction, my dear brother or sister, you would have broken fellowship.

It does not cease a Christian loving you.

It does not cease my loving you.

But it is a love with a broken heart that will be repaired only when there is repentance.

Here is a contrast of approaches between two great men.

I come back to Whitfield.

Whitfield's letter also did something wrong, even though it was very good in spirit for the most part of it.

He revealed a confidential matter that occurred between him and Wesley.

Wesley, you see, was using lottery to determine God's will, but he told no one except Whitfield, because he looked up to Whitfield as a mature brother, and he said he revealed that he was casting lots to determine God's will.

And Whitfield wrote it in his letter.

He probably came to your position because you cast lots, and so everybody got to know.

But Whitfield humbled himself, asked the forgiveness of Wesley, and their friendship was restored.

Here is another case.

C.H. Spurgeon was figured in the controversy known as downgrade controversy with fellow Baptists in 1887.

It was called downgrade controversy because he wrote in the editorial of their church magazine, The Sword and Trowel,

the downgrade of the Baptist Union, the Association of Baptists then, that many of them, the leadership was becoming liberal.

He had a confidential meeting with some of those leaders and some of those admitted to their liberal views.

Now when Spurgeon was challenged by the Association to point who were the liberals, he refused, because it was confidential.

And the Association had a vote which in effect expelled him.

He was the one treated as the wrongdoer, even though he was exercising integrity not to reveal what was said in confidence.

That's why near the end of his life, he wrote, I am willing to be eaten by dogs now, but the next generations will vindicate me.

Imagine the integrity of a man who would keep to his pledge of confidentiality, even if it meant to be treated as wrongdoer.

That's the challenge of Christian love.

That's the challenge to you and me, brethren, that we are to love that covers a multitude of sins. And I am aware that this runs against the grain of our native instincts to retaliate, to do what is done to us.

And I'm guilty of the same, even with fellow ministers. There was a time that there was such a conflict among ministers of preformed Baptist persuasion.

I wish it could be said of me as it was said of Jesus when he was reviled, he did not revile in return, but to my shame, that was not what happened when I was reviled, I reviled in return.

And there was mutual revulsion until we are sunk neck deep in that mutual revulsion until we realized our sin and begged each other's forgiveness.

And that's the point, brethren, the challenge of love is to cover a multitude of sins, keep secret, keep confidential, what should not be out in public.

But for those so wrong, do not take that as getting away with it.

We have to repair the relationship by the step of repentance. So either on the offended side or the offender side, it is something that goes against our natural grain and how we need to pray that it is not our own way that will prevail.

Our song, our last response song is a prayer. Have thine own way, Lord. Have thine own way. That is what we need. Have the way of the Lord in dealing and in loving, in loving and in dealing with sin.

Let us sing. Have thine own way, Lord.

Let's close in prayer.

Our great God and gracious Heavenly Father, may it really be our desire that people will see in us the Christ living in us and that we are yielded to Him.

And there is perhaps no challenge more in need of yielding and of surrendering to His will than that of loving the sinning brethren.

It is easy to make a cut out whether by way of covering up sin, because we do not want to put the situation in anything awkward, embarrassing to the offender, and we don't want to hurt him.

And yet, it is something that love calls on us to do.

Or it may be that we resort to taking cover. We do not want to get into trouble. We do not want to get hurt.

But neither is the way of Christian love.

So help us, Lord, to accept the challenge of true Christian love that we do not take the easy cup out in dealing with sinning brethren.

But instead, help us to know the application of this exhortation to cover the multitude of sins.

It is that we love and deal with our sinning brethren in private as much as able not to bring into open strife what is a private matter.

It is so contrary to the way of the world today that broadcasts everything.

But it is still the way of your word that whoever goes around slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy keeps it covered.

And it is the rule of Jesus Christ in His church that where there is sin, there must be dealing one on one, not seeking alliances, for we are not at war with one another.

We seek to restore. We seek to repair. We seek to mend a broken relationship.

But yes, there are times when there is no response of repentance, that there has to be a keeping away of company.

And we pray, Lord, that we may know and have the discernment to know what is the right response in a given situation of dealing with our sinning brethren,

always bearing in mind how you have dealt with us, for we are sinners and we have committed more sins than anyone can ever commit against us.

And more people have committed offenses against you than ever any number of people can commit against us.

And we have no reason not to be ready to reconcile and to forgive, but we also need to confront and correct in private.

Help us, Lord, to have such love in this church, a love that seeks reconciliation, correction, confrontation, forgiveness, withdrawal when necessary,

but always praying, even for the cynic, always desiring that he may be corrected from the error of his way to walk on the path of righteousness.

Make us such a church that will reflect the Lord Jesus Christ.

And now may the love of the Father, the grace of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.
In Jesus' name we pray these things. Amen.