

Message #1

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Date: 25 September 2026

Preacher: Joe Novenson

[0:00] I want to start with a personal word about me and then a personal word about you as we get underway.

! First, my thanks for both Barb and me invited to be here. To let me come back is an enormous blessing.

I told you last year and I want to repeat, you are heroes to me. This is not flattery, that's called sin. It is respect. And so to invite me to be a small encouragement to you means a great deal. Still speaking about me, can we please act like we're all closer than we really are?

And what I mean by that is, I do not want to be boring or confusing because Jesus was neither of those and I neither want to fail him nor you.

[1:06] And so let's act like Presbyterians, if you're willing. All in favor of telling Joe if he's boring or confusing, signify by saying aye. Any opposed? Motion carries. Thank you very much.

That means a lot to me. I'll feel more at home. And I'll be more courageous to speak if I know you'll be frank. Because I want to be a help.

Now about you. The sanctuary has stress fractures. And you'll be meeting in your fellowship hall. You found out Monday.

By God's providential blessing. The Glenwood schools not meeting this week so you don't have to rush back as soon as we finish tomorrow. But take a deep breath.

And let's remember who you are. That's really what I want to come to say.

[2:12] I want you as New City Fellowship, if God would be so kind, to allow me to say you must not forget who you are. As members of the Church of Jesus Christ, but as members of New City Fellowship.

To be clear, this is all before I pray and get into the scripture. So this doesn't count against my time.
January 16th, 1963.

Hazelwood Reformed Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. Will Barker preached a sermon moved by the murder of Medgar Evers.

Four days later, he preached and said these words. If race means something to any of us, and by that he didn't mean that we ignore race.

But if it ever is a reason for you to turn from another human is what he meant. If race means something to any of us, it's evidence that Christ has not come to mean enough.

[3:27] There was a man and a woman sitting in that congregation named Rudy and Colin Schmidt. And in 1964, the next year, Covenant College left St. Louis and came to Lookout Mountain.

In 1966, at the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church at the Evangelical Synod, may
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greater obedience and the great commission to his disciples of whatever race, that you love one

another as I have loved you, that ye also may love one another.

Mark Bells wrote of that. The synod passed this and was acknowledging that the church had something of which to repent. Racial discrimination was tacitly, if not expressly acknowledged. And it was being acknowledged not because African Americans were taking the floor, but because there weren't any of them in the room.

In 1968, they passed a declaration that said any opposition to interracial marriage was unbiblical.

[5:15] 1968, they did that. As the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. I want to speak to you about not drifting, dulling, or hardening.

You have been pleased to do things with this beloved flock that broke molds, changed directions, challenged mediocrity, complicit indulgence, and said not if we follow Jesus.

Please, Lord, in moments, help us learn how none of us may drift from you, harden to you, become dull to you.

We're asking for the grace to learn this all the way down deeper than our dear. What if there's a fin in the water right here?

And it doesn't even leave a ripple. You could drift, harden, or dull, and the person seated near you would not even be able to tell.

[6:44] Your kids couldn't tell? Your mate? Your siblings? Your friends? Because it doesn't leave a ripple.

Let me leave the metaphor. The words used by the author, drift. What do you have to do for a boat to drift? It's a very simple answer.

Just don't put an oar in the water. Don't raise a sail. Today, don't have a motor. You just put a boat in the water. You leave it alone. It ain't going to stay there.

It'll drift. What do you have to do for clay to harden? Answer again. Nothing. Just don't touch it. Just leave it alone.

It won't become more malleable in your hands. It'll harden. And I'm pushing the Greek here, and I realize that. What do you have to do for the finest piece of cutlery to become dull?

[7:50] I don't care how good it is, or what it's made out of. You leave it alone long enough, it won't become sharper. It will dull. I would argue that this is one of the most lethal things that happens to Christians in response to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And when it happens this way, anything can happen this way. Let me try and make you see how clearly this is one of the most serious threats to our lives, spiritually speaking.

If I say the name of these two cities, think about what comes to your mind. Sodom and Gomorrah immediately comes to the mind.

Graphic, horrific, aggressive, offensive sin of the most horrific kind. It's not wrong. But when you read Ezekiel 16, 49, Ezekiel says, this is the sin of your sister Sodom.

She was overfed. Now the next word is various, translated, unconcerned, lazy, apathetic.

[9:15] You see, when you become apathetic toward Jesus, you could do anything to your body or anybody else's body.

Underneath that horrific sin was drifting, hardening, and dulling. I'll put it simply. I would argue that for the Christian to say to God, nah, nah, is worse for the world than the unbeliever going, no!

And that nah can come theologically, like it did for John the Baptist when he was about to have his head cut off because a maniac wanted some pornographic pleasure and he didn't have a cell phone.

so he asked Salome to dance at the expense of John the Baptist's head and he sends a question to Jesus. I know I'm your cousin.

I know I've beheld the Trinity. I know I've said, you must increase, I must decrease. Are you the one? Or should we expect another?

[10:38] The nah can come theologically. It can come familially. Do you remember when Job said this? My breath is a stench to my wife.

Nah. Forgive? Nah. It can come because of church difficulties. Jeremiah preached 41 years and never got an amen.

Isaiah preached 61 and we believe they cut him in half. It can come from a lot of directions. Nah.

Here's the second reason I think this is among the most dangerous. You know well, Jesus was asked, Rabbi, what is the greatest commandment? And he said in Matthew 22, I shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind, and strength and thy neighbor as thyself.

On these two laws hang all the law and the prophets. Now if that's true, and it is, then that means that the greatest sin, if that's the greatest law, isn't something you do, something you don't do.

[11:56] I just don't love you. And I don't love you. You start to see how central it is to spiritual.

You could wash up on the shore, ecclesiastically speaking, disembowed simply by doing nothing.

After the tabernacle was built and the priests are all ready for the sacrifice.

In Leviticus chapter 4, do you remember the first sins God told Moses for which to sacrifice? It wasn't idolatry. He said, the first sins, unintentional sins.

Excuse my Philadelphian. Holy kaffoli. I know what I do intentionally. And God just said, Moses, you tell the people, I know them so much better than they know themselves.

They don't know me very well. They don't know themselves very well. But I know them. Let's deal with the stuff they don't even intend. Here's the last point I'll make.

[13:12] If I'm right that the solution to the problem is the first verses of the book of Hebrews, and I think I am, do you understand Hebrews is like the emergency room of the Bible? Did you notice there's no introduction?

It's not like, hello, James, a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. Greetings. There's no introduction. Just in the past, God spoke to our forefathers in various ways and at various times, but in these last days, he's spoken to us by his son.

This is an ER. If you've ever been to an ER in an emergency, I'll tell you what it's like when I crush my hands. They pushed me through those double doors after I crushed my hands and came in the ambulance and a lady came right up to my pant leg all the way down here.

Another one came up to my shirt. The scissors just went... I was buck naked in seconds and they're putting intravenous in my arms and they're shouting commands to one another.

No one said to me, Mr. Novenson, we're so glad you're here. Welcome to our ER. They went to work because they didn't want me to lose my hands.

[14:25] The author of the book of Hebrews, this could be a sermon. The author of the book of Hebrews is saying, no introduction. I'm putting the defib pallets right on your chest.

Boom! You need to look at Jesus. And that brings me to what the solution is not. I have not come here to tell you to buck up.

Many sermons today are buck up sermons. I am going to be 74 in a few weeks. My buckler busted a long time ago.

He doesn't say that. He says, you look at the one who came and got you. So the solution, listen to it.

He is God's last word, greatest word. No, that's not enough. He's the one who's appointed heir of all things. No, that's not enough.

[15:29] He's the one through whom he made the universe. That's not enough. He sustains all things by his powerful word. He just said, there is nothing more important that God has to say than that which is embodied and expressed in his own son.

And by his death, he rightfully owns you and everything in the cosmos. Yes. And he made it all. And right now, your body isn't turning to atoms and drifting into the air because he spoke a word that is holding you together.

Right now. The point is really clear. The bigger your view of your Savior, the less you'll drift, harden and dull.

If you got a little Jesus, you're toast. You'll drift, harden and dull very quickly.

You can see it by God's choice of how he reveals himself to those from whom he's about to ask much. Do you remember that the Trinity shows up only a few times to human senses in the New Testament?

[16:53] But remember to whom it does. John the Baptist. He didn't know he was going to end up in prison and have his head cut off. God knew.

So at the baptism, the son is standing there. The Holy Spirit descends like a dove and the father speaks. This is my beloved son.

Listen to him. Excuse me, there he says, in whom I'm well pleased. He doesn't add that. It's like he grabs John's chin and goes, look at me.

Look at me. I'm going to ask a lot of you in a little while. You need to see, hear, me. The Mount of Transfiguration.

Peter, James, John, Peter will be crucified. History and legend meld. We can't get it sorted out. Apparently, they said, we're going to kill you like we killed your master.

[17:57] And Peter apparently said, you do me too much honor. Do it upside down. So they did. And they crucified him upside down. James, as I read to you, was killed in downtown Jerusalem.

John, the last living apostle, he saw or learned of the death of all of his friends. And he's the last one.

And what does God give them on the Mount of Transfiguration? The sun standing there in the Old Testament symbol of the Holy Spirit descends, the pillar of fire, the Shekinah glory, and Christ starts to glow.

And the father says, this is my beloved son. Listen to him. Again, look at me. Stephen is about to be stoned. They're apparently already chucking.

And Stephen says, he looked up and he sees at the right hand of the father, the son, standing. He's standing in the place of the defense attorney as if to say, the trumped up court down there is killing you.

[19:05] But not up here. You're mine. And brought him home. The more he calls you to, the bigger you need a few of Jesus.

But here's our problem. It doesn't feel like he's that big or in control, does it? Let me take you to two verses where he looks completely out of control and the exact opposite is true.

In John 18, first let me pause. Is this boring? Is this confusing? You're following me? Yes. Okay, John 18.

You know the story. It's the arrest. Jesus has just asked the disciples to come and pray with him. Peter, James, and John. They can't give him three minutes of waking time.

They fall asleep. And then comes Judas. An entourage. Scholars disagree. Some say it was 16. Some say it was less.

[20:08] Some say it was many more. We don't know. But one of them is Malchus. And Malchus starts to come forward. And you remember one of my favorite verses? It says, And Jesus went out and spoke to them.

And he said, Who are you looking for? They said, Jesus of Nazareth. That's one of my favorite verses. And he said, I who speak to you am he. They all fell on the ground.

I can see them all going, Who hit me? I don't know. Why am I on the ground? I'm not sure. He just used his Old Testament name. I am he.

Wham! They're on the ground. It's like he took his sword and just pulled it out a little bit so the hilt glistened. And then he put it back and said, Okay, come and take me.

Didn't look in control, though, did he? It's even more so. Malchus comes forward. Well, by this time, Peter's up. And he gets up and he does an end run around Jesus and Malchus comes to Peter.

[21:16] You know, and it says, Peter draws a sword and cuts off Malchus' ear. And I don't think Peter went, I think he went for the neck.

And Malchus ducked and his ear went, And do you remember what happened next? Jesus, I don't know if he picked up the ear or he made a new one.

But he puts his hand on Malchus' head. Whoa. And then he yells at Peter. Live by the sword and die by it.

I can see Malchus is the most confused guy in the whole Bible. Okay, I come to kill you. And you try to kill me. And then you heal me.

Who's in control here? That's it. And then how about at the trial? No offense to Mel Gibson, and I don't like Jesus movies very much, but he wasn't even in the ballpark.

[22:20] Isaiah 52 says he was beaten beyond human recognition. Not a bone was broken, but he looked like a possum on the side of a road.

And it says he's standing in front of Pilate. What must that have looked like? And Pilate says to him, Don't you realize I have the power to kill you or set you free?

I love Jesus' answer. This is the Joe Novenson authorized translation. You poor little man. You think you've got me.

You don't have me. You don't have me. My father and I have you. Do what I will you to do.

Take me out. And I will save my people. If he were from the south, he would have said, Watch this.

[23:23] You would have no power if it had not been given to you from on high. Doesn't look in control, does he? This is what it feels like to be New City Fellowship when God doesn't seem to be

in control and the walls start cracking.

Lord, we're kind of losing it down here. So you don't want to tell you. Again, I've never heard his voice, not expecting to, but it's like he goes, I know.

Now listen, I mean, it's really hard. We didn't see this coming and we're really trying to do the good stuff. I know.

No, I've got to make this clear. I mean, I'm feeling like certifiably, I'm going to break down. I am completely out of control. Control.

I've never been in control. I know. Oh, this is faith. This is believing in sovereignty.

[24:37] You're in control. And he doesn't even stop there. Not only does he want us to see how absolutely powerful he is, he wants us to know, listen, after he made purification for sins, he sat down.

That sentence is so freighted, I can't unpack it fully. After, meaning it's past. He made purification. Didn't just polish it up a little bit.

Pure. Sins. Plural. All of them. Sat down at the right hand of the Father. Done. When you go through the book of Hebrews, 37 times, Jesus is called priest, high priest, or sacrifice.

It's like a jackhammer on your unbelief. Spurgeon and Henry were right when Matthew, Henry, and Spurgeon both said, your unbelief in the thorough nature of your salvation is to sin under every other sin.

Because when you underestimate how much he's done for you, he'll choose anything else foolishly. And he wants you to see the enormity of his salvation.

[26:05] This doesn't even get into the ballpark, but I hope it makes it vivid. I want you to know the moment I made a decision to marry this woman right here, we were in high school.

And I was to date her at night, and our sewage backed up in our basement. And I mean, backed up, and that's all I'll say.

I'll just stop right there. But it was horrible. It was deep, and it was horrible. And my mom said, you're not going anywhere, you're going to go downstairs, you're going to bucket it out, and put it out in the garden.

And I went, oh great. So I called Barb, said, date's off, sorry. I'm down there scooping, and I'm going up the steps, and I'm down, and slugging through it, and all of a sudden, I see two legs coming down in cutoffs, and they belong to Barb.

She came down the steps, walked right into the sewage, and said, give me a bucket. This really happened. I turned to get a bucket to myself.

[27:06] I said, I'm going to marry this woman. Amen. Because she walked right into the sewage. I can't even touch what he did.

But when you really believe that, the thing that if any of us in this room knew that you thought, felt, did today, that scared the willies out of you, the dream you had, that you can't believe was yours last night, that you had to wake up going, God, I'm so sorry.

Covered. Covered. So, what stopped us from drifting, hardening, or dulling? A massive view of his power.

A massive view of his salvation. Look up here for a closing illustration visually, and then I'll give you one audibly. This is what it's like to become a Christian. This hand is you before you are saved.

It's the most busted up one I have. So this is you. This one is God. And this is what happened when you were saved. You're hanging out. And you went, I think this is God.

[28:27] And you grabbed back. Now if you follow him for more than five minutes, you'll start to do this. Yeah. And you'll even, like Samson or Peter, do this.

Do you know how you stop doing this? Or this? You don't look at this. You look at this. It won't just mold your will.

It'll break your heart that someone would love you like that. Amen. Here's the audible illustration. I had the privilege of meeting a man the year I crushed my hands.

His name was David Ireland. He had a neuromuscular disease. When I met him, it had taken him to a wheelchair. He was told by his doctor, you'll never have kids.

He proved him wrong. His wife became pregnant, but then the doctor said, you're never going to see your son. So he decided he had to parent his son by letters.

[29:40] The book is called Letters to an Unborn Child. It's on my coffee table at home. My favorite letter is the one he says, son, I want to introduce you to your mother.

When she says to me, I'd like you to take me out to eat, this is what it entails. She has to push my wheelchair into the bathroom, remove all my clothes, disconnect my fecal and urine bags, empty them in the toilet, push me into the shower, wash me entirely, take me out, dry me, reconnect my emptied fecal and urine bags, dress me entirely, push the wheelchair into the bedroom and seat me until she showers and then comes out and dresses herself.

She wheels me out to the car, this is before garage door openers and takes out, lifts up the garage door, backs out the car, pulls up my wheelchair, opens the door, lays down a board, pulls up the arm, slides my body across, puts on the seat belt, folds up the wheelchair, puts the board in the back, goes around to the back of the car, lifts up the trunk, puts the chair in the trunk, closes the trunk, brings down the garage door, gets in the car and drives me to the restaurant.

She then feeds me after I order what I want and wipes the drool from my mouth, pays the bill and we go back out to the car and she does it all over again and he repeats it in the letter and then when we get home, she does it again and repeats it in the letter and then says, after she is in bed next to me and she's done all of this, she leans over and says, thank you honey for taking me out to eat tonight.

If when you die, you hear Jesus say, well done, good and faithful servant, I make you promise, you will take your crown off and you will fling it across the crystal sea at his feet and say, all honor, all glory be unto you, oh God.

[31 : 53] I was a paralytic. You carried me the whole way. It was your grip. New City Fellowship, you look there. Don't drift.

Keep going. Let's pray. Jesus, for this beloved flock, for the prices paid in private of which many never knew that were the sweetest and most glorifying to you because they had no reason to do them, just a heavenly one, no earthly one.

Thank you. You see their future. You know they've been working on their vision. Holy King, strengthen thou their hands for the good work to which you've called them and take them into it for the glory of your holy name, Jesus.

Amen.