

BE REAL WITH GOD

June 7, 2020

OPENING

Good morning, it's great to see more of you back in church. We welcome home all the prodigals! We missed you and are so glad you're back. As Bertina said, we're launching a new sermon series today on **how to talk to God**. This morning I will focus on being real with God. That's the best posture of prayer, to simply be honest with Him, because He loves us JUST as we are. We can never overstate how much God loves us – His love is beyond measure.

But before I get into that, I want to spend the first half of my message talking about what a crazy year we've had so far in 2020. Because I just want to vent a little, okay? I know some of us are like, can we hit reset and start over? Can we wake up now from this really bad dream? Or can we please just fast forward to 2021?

We actually started out the year with a lot of hope. I said in Week One that this is **our year** of entering the Promised Land. But I also said, that means we're going to have to face some giants along the way. In fact, the bigger the promise, the bigger the giants; the greater the blessings, the greater the battles. But thanks be to God, because He will fight the battles for us, and He will surely give us victory, not because we're great or deserving, but because He is faithful and true!

But we have a role to play too, and it's prayer. In His mysterious way, God works through our prayers. In fact, **you can't be a Christian and not pray**. The Holy Spirit who lives inside of us wants to breathe, and that breath is prayer. And I don't know about you, but to me, the entire year 2020 has been a big wake-up call for us to PRAY!

2020 IN REVIEW

Let's take a look at what I mean.

Outfits in 2020

January – military uniform

February – fireman outfit

March – infectious disease control (hazmat suit)

April – pajamas – represents the stay-at-home, shelter-in-place orders around the world

May – riot police gear

2020 began with an impeached US President, who just **THREE** days into the new year, ordered the airstrike assassination of Iran's top military general, Qasem Soleimani – a move that previous US presidents had considered far too provocative.

Qasem Soleimani

In Iran, thousands of people flooded the streets to mourn Soleimani's death. Iran was furious and fired missiles at Iraqi bases that housed American troops. No lives were lost, but as tensions rose,

Iran mistakenly shot down a Ukrainian passenger jet and killed all 176 people on board. Thankfully, the US responded diplomatically, not militarily, to Iran's missile attacks, and that has led to the cooling of tensions – for now – because we quickly realized there were far bigger issues that the entire world would have to confront together.

Australia on Fire

Also in January, we saw some crazy Australian wildfires that burnt out of control, burning ~186,000 square kilometers and killing a billion animals. Some endangered species may have been driven to extinction. At its peak, air quality dropped to hazardous levels, and smoke moved across the Pacific Ocean all the way to Chile and Argentina. Thank God, the rains finally came and the fires were contained or extinguished, but they were such a big deal that some people thought THIS would be the defining news event of the year, but boy, were those people mistaken, because...

Covid-19

In January we also saw something called the novel coronavirus, a.k.a. Covid-19. Need I say more? I will just say how thankful I am to have had my family safe here in Taiwan throughout this pandemic. Our plans were severely disrupted, especially our travel plans, because like most of you, we wanted to see family and friends overseas this year.

Travel plans in 2020

But, humor aside, here in Taiwan we never had to go under lockdown.

Protests in US

Finally, when we thought Covid-19 couldn't be topped in the news cycle by anything else, we've recently seen a series of horrific, senseless killings of unarmed black Americans at the hands of police. Racial tensions boiled over and led to angry protests in the streets of virtually every major city in America.

GOD IS CALLING US TO PRAY

Why am I reminding you of all this terrible news? I haven't even mentioned volcanic eruptions, typhoons, floods, protests in Hong Kong, swarms of locusts in Africa, and Asian murder hornets in the USA. Murder hornets, people!

My purpose isn't to strike FEAR into your hearts, but the opposite. Again, I'm simply stating the obvious to those of us who are Christians, that these events are a wake-up call for us to stand in the gap and PRAY. Our prayers have the power to effect change and move God's throne. Our prayers are needed to bring healing, reconciliation and peace.

But **prayer is actually more about changing us and our attitudes**, than it is about changing God. When we pray, we cast our cares and anxieties upon Him, and He gives us peace in the middle of the storm.

We can't survive for long besieged by constant fear and stress. We all need a positive, healthy outlet for our emotions, and that's what prayer does for us, to take those things away, if we are willing to **be real with God**.

REAL OR FAKE?

So what does that mean?

Let's play a quick game and see if you can tell the difference between what's real and fake.

Adidos

What's wrong with this picture? Should it be three stripes or four?

Louis Vuitton

How about this one? This is obviously fake, but given fashion trends, who knows, maybe this will become trendy someday. But the misspelling gives it away.

But even if it were spelled correctly, just because you write "Louis Vuitton" on something doesn't make that thing a Louis Vuitton. In the same way, just printing something in a newspaper doesn't make it news. Just slapping a title on a book that says TRUTH doesn't make the contents of that book true.

Channel

How about this? Can you spot the fake shirt? This one is especially funny for me, having grown up in Korea, because I always got a kick out of seeing knockoff counterfeits there of famous brands.

So how about us? Are we real? Are we Christians because of the way we present ourselves to people on the outside, or because of the labels we wear? If I'm honest, I see so much that is fake in me. There's so much hiding, pretending and masking – covering my flaws and shame – pretending to be someone that I'm not. I'd guess that we could all improve in being more real with God and with one another.

BE REAL WITH GOD

Let me give you two practical ways we can improve our prayer lives by being real.

No. 1 – Pray the Psalms

Psalm 51:6-7, 10-11

⁶ Behold, *you delight in truth in the inward being,*
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow

¹⁰ *Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.*

¹¹ *Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.*

Pray the **Psalms**. We know that the psalmists' heart cry was real. When we see that they were genuine in their emotions about their fears, struggles, and even hopelessness and despair; we know that they were also genuine in their faith, hope, triumphs and celebrations.

Sometimes, to get real, we need to allow suffering and pain to do their work. Sometimes if we really want TRUTH in the innermost parts, we have to give the Holy Spirit free reign to search our hearts and to convict and expose anything and everything that is false. Read the words of **Psalm 51** again – that's what David did here after he committed his gravest sins as a king, including adultery and murder.

I shared a lot of funny photos with you today, but the reality is that these are very appropriate times for mourning. Even Jesus, the most joyful person who ever lived, had deep sorrow toward the suffering of mankind. This is why Jesus said blessed are those who mourn now, because they will laugh later.

Ecclesiastes 7:2-4

It is better to go to house of mourning than feasting... Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Mourning and sorrow are better, because they reveal what's true, what's real. American poet Emily Dickinson saw a lot of suffering and death in her lifetime and wrote this famous line, "*I like the look of pain because I know it's real.*" In real pain and tears, there's no deceit. In those who cry a lot and shed many tears, there is less sin, less falsehood.

If you get stuck in prayer, or feel like you don't know what to pray, go to the **Psalms** and read them out loud. They will help you get real with God. And He will respond to your honesty and vulnerability.

No. 2 – Follow Jesus' Example

Matthew 6:5-8

⁵ *"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Second, we will be real when we follow Jesus, because He detested hypocrisy and deceit. If you look at His life, He didn't speak out against political or military power. He didn't protest against Herod or Caesar. I'm not saying we shouldn't protest against bad forms of government; we should exercise our civic duty and do our best to make Democracy work well. But what I am saying is that Jesus had a higher cause, a higher priority. Where did He direct His harshest rebukes? It was to the self-righteous, religious leaders, the false teachers, the hypocrites. This is consistent with what we find in the Old Testament because God can't stand falsehood in His presence!

Let me explain this further by describing the different types of masks we wear.

Religious Mask

- This is what the Pharisees were guilty of most. They valued religious prestige, titles, fame, stature and being seen as rabbis. In modern terms, this might look like being the president of a seminary, having written several best-selling books, being a world-renowned Christian speaker, having a certain following on social media, and so on.
- I experienced a lot of religiosity first-hand growing up as a pastor's kid in the Korean church context. It's like in taekwondo: new believers start out as white belts, and if you attend enough Bible studies and prayer meetings, you move up a level and become a deacon. By the time you become an elder or pastor, you can even earn a black belt. And everyone thinks you're holy and more spiritual than others.
- But this is the wrong approach to God. None of these makes you a child of God, but could instead make you prideful and less real. Religion is often about power and control. It's about DOs and DON'Ts, how to earn favor with God so you can obligate Him to do your bidding. It's like treating God like an ATM machine – if you do enough good deeds, you make deposits into your account so you can make withdrawals later when you need some favor. But God isn't like that. Yes, there is the principle of sowing and reaping, but God is personal and relational, not transactional. He doesn't answer our prayers because we are good and deserving, but He responds to us because of grace, because of relationship.
- Those who live by faith, who rely on sheer grace, will willingly surrender power. That's what Jesus did for us on the cross. At the cross we, too, must divest ourselves of our power, rights, privileges and opinions. Only that kind of surrendering allows His grace to shine through.

Cultural Mask

- As Asians, we belong to a shame-based culture where we cannot lose face – we can't even go to counselors to admit we need help. Combine this with social and religious pressures, and no wonder we see so much mental illness and even many young people committing suicide.
- We all want to puff up our family honor and name, but we need to learn to take off these cultural masks before God. It's hypocritical if we smile and pretend everything is fine at church or in public, and especially on social media, when it's like World War 3 at home!
- Our culture tells us to hide our problems, but we have to be vulnerable and real before God. The only sin that we won't be healed of is the sin that we conceal from Him.

Social Mask

- The Pharisees were like the CEOs, PhDs and MDs of their day. They could say of others, "those people are so immoral, ignorant and deplorable, but thank God we're so great!"
- We all try hard to fit into the right circles. Maybe if I wear the right clothes, drive the right car or live in the right neighborhood, we'll have the right friends. Maybe then society will like me and accept me. But again, God does not honor people because of these superficial things. Instead, social masks are impediments to our prayers to God.

Gender Mask

- There will probably be many more women than men in heaven because men are taught not to be vulnerable. But to meet with God, we have to acknowledge our weaknesses and our inability to save ourselves. We all desperately need a Savior!

Age Mask

- Why is it that as we get older, we get worse, not better? This is why Jesus welcomed children. It's not because kids are sinless, but it's because they're humble and transparent. Jesus said we must be like this in order to go to heaven.

Race Mask

- We all represent certain races, and it's so easy to get offended when someone insults us or our people or family. But we can't take the bait of Satan and get so easily offended.
- I'm not saying we should deny who we are or ignore racial injustice. God will honor every nation, every tribe, every tongue. He created beautiful diversity and will bring the wealth of the nations to Himself.
- But what is our core identity? Ultimately, race does not define us. God has given us a new identity and new citizenship in Christ.

NONE of these masks matters to God. None of them will help you find favor with Him. You can find yourself among the most disadvantaged and underprivileged, and God will welcome you because He loves and accepts you as you are through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Let's follow Jesus' example. He came in grace and truth. He displayed genuine humility, vulnerability and authenticity. He showed that He has nothing to hide. In every interaction with every person while on earth, He was 100% genuine, 100% real, all the time.

Prayer is about unmasking yourself before God. It's about finding truth in the innermost place. It's about confessing our need for Him. It's not about our qualifications or self-righteousness. It's not about fancy words. It's not a job interview!

So how do we talk to God? Just be vulnerable and real.

CAST YOUR CARES ON HIM

In a way, God prepared my heart and mind for these crises in 2020. On New Year's Eve, I was driving to Los Angeles airport and listened to an old sermon by Billy Graham on the radio. It was so impactful, that before returning the rental car, I started taking down notes furiously, and this is the gist of what I wrote.

We don't know what 2020 will hold. It's an election year, and anything wild and crazy can happen. But no matter what happens, Donald Trump doesn't own the future. Neither do the Democrats. Only Christ holds the future. The future belongs to Christ and His faithful followers who endure to the end. In 2020, some of our hopes and dreams WILL be shattered. It could be our health! But Christ will be in the middle of our health crisis. In Christ, one of two things will happen. He will either heal us; or if He doesn't heal us, He will give us the strength, wisdom and grace to find Him in our crisis.

The Twelve Disciples had their hopes dashed too. They wanted a new Messianic kingdom where Israel would be restored over Rome. The Jewish people were waiting for a Messiah who would be a King unlike any Ruler in history, with unprecedented political and military might. And so many Jews felt the

sense that the arrival of this Messiah was imminent. The Twelve Disciples were excited at the idea of ruling over their oppressors and enemies.

But Jesus had other ideas. He predicted that His followers would have sorrow. He knew they would undergo incredible confusion, devastating disappointment. He said, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, for I have overcome the world." He also said, "My peace I give to you, but not as the world gives. So don't let your hearts be troubled or afraid."

The disappointments and setbacks will hurt for a moment, but they are producing in us such a perseverance, character, integrity, endurance, hope. We need these qualities to be like Christ so we can reign with Him for eternity. Jesus is in the middle of the storm. And what He has in store for us is far greater, far more amazing than just ruling over our enemies here on earth. We will reign together with Christ in a kingdom of perfect righteousness, peace and joy where there is no evil, no violence and no sorrow.

I don't know what the remainder of 2020 holds for us. We might see more chaos and mayhem. We might see more violence, war, disease, famine and natural disasters. But the one safe place to be is right in the middle of God's will, right in His loving hands.

I Peter 5:6-7

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

In prayer, we can cast our cares upon Him. Then we will learn that God's heart is to save us from our situation. All the world religions call people to pray, but only Christianity offers us a Savior. There is tremendous suffering in the world today, but the Christian response to that suffering isn't philosophy, but a Person, who lived 30 years as an oppressed minority under brutal Roman rule. He was a "man of sorrows" who was familiar with suffering. Ultimately, instead of allowing the fullness of God's righteous judgment to fall upon the human race, He took on the punishment that we deserved, so that we could look to Him in our time of suffering and be saved. This is why Jesus is uniquely qualified to ask us to pray to Him, because **He sees, He hears, He cares, and He understands.**

God has called us for such a time as this. The Church has always led during times of crisis. Not always perfectly, but we were made for this. There's a softening of hearts today because people have been devastated. People are looking for answers... for truth, justice and hope.

First, let's take off the masks that we use to hide our true selves, and pray honestly and humbly to our God. Prayer is a posture not of demanding things from God, but of surrendering and yielding to His will. Let's allow God to shape us into a people that will bring glory to His Name.