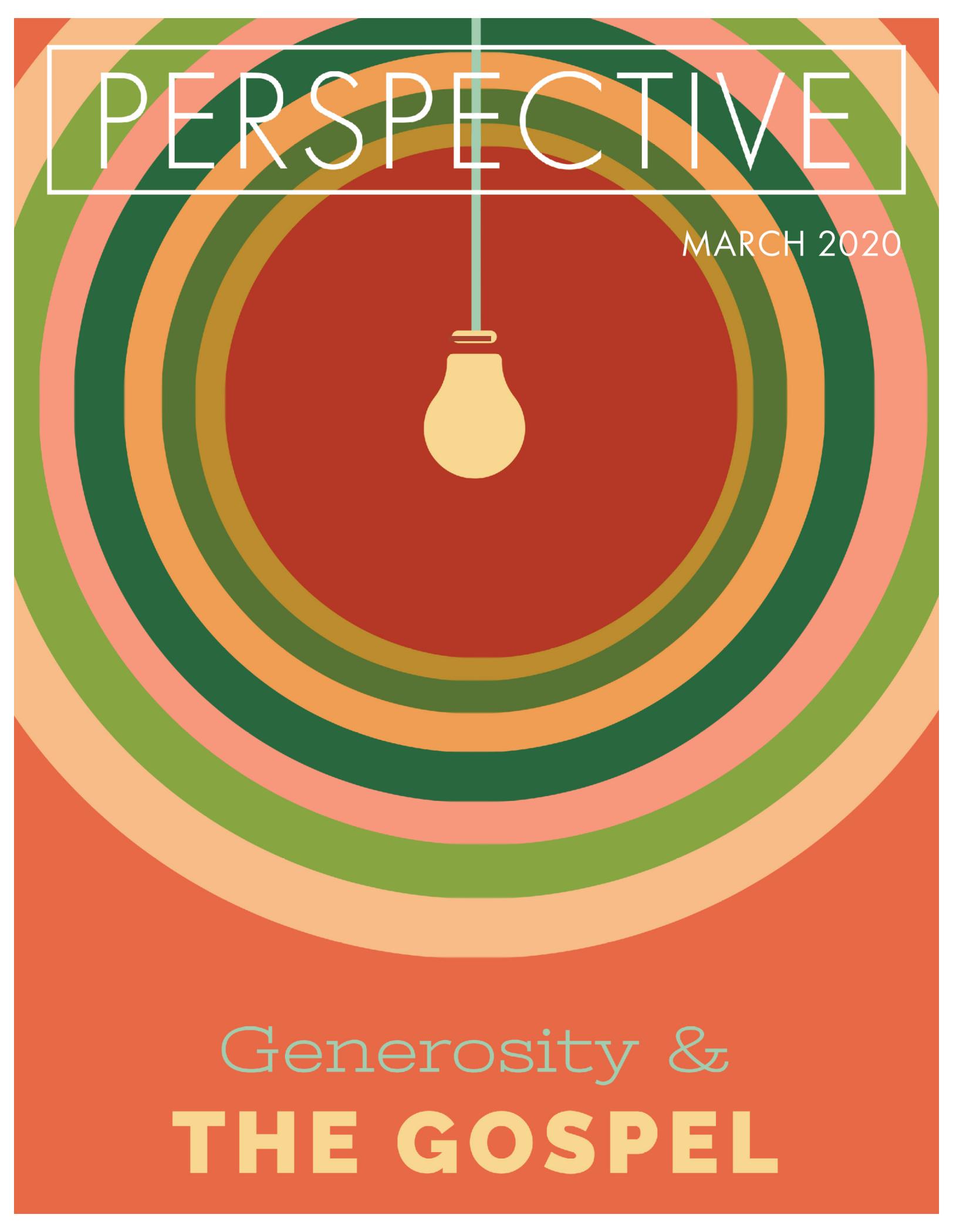


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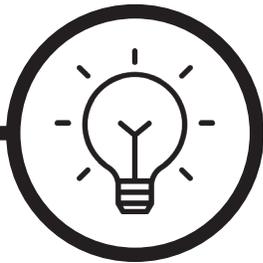
MARCH 2020

Generosity &
THE GOSPEL

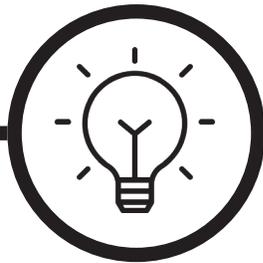
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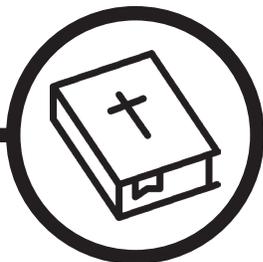
ARTICLE 1
Generosity and the Gospel
Ryan and Griffin James



BOOK HIGHLIGHT 4
Something Needs to Change
by David Platt
Recommended by Alex Freemon



BOOK HIGHLIGHT 5
Evangelism as Exiles
by Elliott Clark
Recommended by Liz Freemon



BIBLE READING PLAN 6
Take Up & Read
March

Generosity and the Gospel

A GREATER WEALTH

Famous for co-founding The Home Depot, Atlanta resident Bernie Marcus and his wife Billi are known as two of the top charitable donors in the United States. The Marcus Foundation and the Marcus Autism Center, located here in Atlanta, help provide children with special needs some of the best healthcare available. There's no doubt that the Marcus's generosity has touched the lives of countless children and families, maybe even someone you know personally.

Most of us won't become famous philanthropists like the Marcuses; yet as Christians, we are in fact the wealthiest people in the world. We have been given a gift far greater than financial wealth—a right relationship with God, adoption as his sons and daughters, and an eternity in heaven with him. All of this infinite wealth flows to us through the gospel of Jesus, and now Christ commands us to go and make eternal investments by sharing his gospel. Regardless of how much our bank statement claims we have, we are called to generously share the message of the riches of God's grace to everyone around us (Eph. 1:7, 2:7).

The eternal impact of being open-handed with the wealth of the gospel is two-fold. First, when we obey God's command to share the gospel with others, he is glorified regardless of how they respond. Secondly, when lost sinners hear the good news and God opens their eyes, their destinies are eternally altered! The eternal nature of the work God has given us to do should excite our hearts to boldly share the gospel.

A LIFESTYLE OF GOSPEL GENEROSITY

Before serving overseas on a university campus in Bosnia, I (Griffin) attended training sessions about what to expect when moving to a new country. The speakers explained to us that while moving overseas may seem exciting at first, the realities of cultural differences will eventually begin to set in, and the temptation to withdraw from your new surroundings and seek personal comfort will begin. They emphasized that in order to be faithful evangelists, we would need to fight to love and embrace the new culture we've been called to. When our team got settled in Bosnia, we tried hard to be fully immersed by hiring a language tutor, playing on local sports teams, joining a local band, and spending as much time as possible with our new friends, students, and neighbors. Students were noticing the energy we put into making their country our own, and our efforts began opening doors to be generous with the gospel. Yet despite all of this, over time, a number of our teammates began retreating to the

comforts of their apartments and became disengaged from our new city and its people. As a result, ministry became harder, and fewer students were engaged with the gospel.

In the same way, the church cannot live behind closed doors and expect to have opportunities to share about God's grace. In order to be effective evangelists, we must be willing to take on this "full immersion" lifestyle. Whether it's your work-place, your neighborhood, your school, or your family, God has sovereignly placed people in your life who are spiritually bankrupt and who are in desperate need of Jesus. We must be willing to put our preferences aside for the sake of the lost around us. Many of us struggle to get to know our neighbors, in particular, because many of them are not like us. They often have different beliefs, political views, and may even speak a different native language. Opening yourself up to people with different backgrounds and worldviews may not be easy, but as followers of Jesus, we're called to deny ourselves—and our comforts—take up our cross and follow him (Luke 9:23). Following Jesus means spending time with those who may be difficult to love in order to generously share with them the greatest treasure we could ever give.

If you struggle to know how to begin to get to know those around you, it's important to not over complicate it. As funny as it may sound, one of the best things you can do to get to know your neighbors better is to spend time outside. In our experience, it's so much easier to meet people while going for a walk, sitting on your front porch, doing yard work, or playing with your kids in the yard. If you live in an apartment, take your kids to the playground, use the shared outdoor grill, or make a point to go to the pool. Have church friends over to partner with you and intentionally invite the neighbors you have been wanting to get to know. These simple activities often provide natural opportunities to meet your neighbors and get to know them better, so be ready and expectant for spontaneous conversations to begin.

Scripture reminds us that despite what city or neighborhood we call "home," our true citizenship is in heaven and we are simply sojourners here on earth. We are awaiting Christ's return and the glorious day that we'll be in our forever home in heaven (Phil 3:20). This truth should motivate us to dig deep into where God has temporarily placed us and wholeheartedly share the gospel naturally, regularly, and with a sense of urgency.

BECOMING A GENEROUS FRIEND

When we faithfully push past the barriers of getting to know the people around us, we may be surprised at how willing people are to become friends. Many of us

can remember what life was like before we knew Christ and how lonely and empty our lives were. In our sin and selfishness, our friendships were often based on what we could “get” rather than what we could “give.” It’s likely that your lost neighbors and coworkers may not have any true friends who love them for their sake, and not to gain anything in return. Being fully loved and accepted by God, we are free to be the most generous and kindest of friends. The security we have in Christ should propel each of us into the lives of those around us where we can love them with a sacrificial, Christ-like love. The aim of our efforts isn’t to be the “nicest” friend that they’ve ever had so that we can be praised, but to become the aroma of Christ to them (2 Cor. 2:15) in order that we might have an open door to generously share the good news of the gospel.

Most importantly, being a generous friend to the lost means caring primarily about the state of their soul. The aim in every friendship with those who are perishing should be to gently and lovingly explain to them that God desires that everyone be saved, and that they have the opportunity to be reconciled to God through Christ’s atoning blood. A true Christian friend is also careful to not neglect the rest of the gospel, the truth that everyone who does not repent of their sin and submit their entire life to Christ will one day die in their sin and spend eternity in hell. We have the opportunity to wave the red flag and warn our loved ones of the danger that’s ahead for those who are not in Christ. If you have children, think about the times that you have naturally, without reservation, grabbed their hand when they started to run into the street. You loved them so much that you wanted to save them from harm, no matter how it might have made them feel at the time. In the same way, we’re called to love our lost friends so much that we can’t help but lovingly and gently warn them of God’s coming judgment and the forgiveness that’s offered in Christ Jesus.

GOSPEL GENEROSITY REQUIRES PLANNING AND INTENTIONALITY

When I (Ryan) first started working at Georgia Tech in my early twenties, I was eager to share the gospel with my coworkers. Not one of them knew the Lord, and I knew God had placed me in their path so I could point them to Christ. I remember longing for opportunities to share the gospel with them, and I spent hours seeking to befriend them so that I would have a foundation from which to share when the time came. By God’s grace, he did help me to share the gospel with several of them, but not all. I remember the day when my boss of several years said to me, “Well, today is my last day.” I was sad to see him leave, but I was even more disappointed that I never shared the good news he so desperately needed. That week I reflected back on my years with Dave, and I thought about why it

was that I hadn’t shared the gospel with him. I realized that I had been waiting for just the “right moment” when our conversation would finally naturally drift to spiritual things, but that moment simply never came. Dave was a very busy person, and our day-to-day conversation stayed mostly on matters of business.

Around this time, I realized that my outlook on evangelism needed to change. I realized that unless I intentionally steered the conversation toward God, I would never have the opportunity to share Christ with so many people that I knew and cared about. If you are reading this article right now, you probably have the desire to share the gospel, but you may be holding out for an opportunity that might never come. If this is you, I would encourage you to change how you do evangelism. I would encourage you to plan how you are going to share the gospel.

Spend time in advance praying and thinking through what you might talk about during your next conversation with a non-Christian in your life. If you don’t know them very well yet, think about a few topics that you may have in common that you could connect with the gospel or your life at Mount Vernon. Ask good questions about how their weekend was, and be ready to share how you were challenged in Sunday’s sermon about friendship, for example, and talk about how knowing Jesus is the “friendship of friendships.”¹ In our experience, deeper relationships of trust are built when we are honest. If after a few attempts it’s difficult to bring up the gospel in everyday conversation, I have found it to be a great blessing to be direct with someone in your life. It may look like inviting a coworker to lunch and saying something as simple as, “Bill, there is something I’ve been wanting to ask you about. I’m a Christian, and I was wondering what you believed about God.” Surprisingly, I have found this kind of directness to be well-received, as people seem to appreciate the upfront honesty. In many ways, this form of approaching a gospel conversation with someone can actually be much more natural than trying to awkwardly steer a conversation that’s unrelated.

Being intentional may also look like hosting an evangelistic Bible study in your home. Consider going door to door around your neighborhood and inviting your neighbors to a six-week *Christianity Explained* Bible study. A couple of years ago, another church member went door to door and invited his neighbors to a Bible study at his house. His boldness encouraged us to do the same in our new neighborhood. As we went around inviting our neighbors, we noticed that many of them appreciated the invitation even if they weren’t interested. Being upfront about our beliefs also made it clear to them that we were evangelical

Christians, which has made it more natural to talk about God and our church since then. While some of the neighbors we invited didn't come to the study, many were willing to come and heard the gospel as a result. We have personally found *Christianity Explained* to be a wonderful resource for unpacking the foundational truths of Christianity to the unsaved people in our lives.

PREPARE TO CROSS THE PAIN LINE

When Mount Vernon focused on evangelism in 2018, all members were sent a copy of Rico Tice's *Honest Evangelism*². In the opening chapter, the author talks about how sharing the gospel requires us to "cross the pain line." This chapter was such a blessing to both of us, as it described the simple truth that Jesus is sending us out "like sheep among wolves" (Matt. 10:16) and as a result, there will be difficulty and even pain when we share the gospel. When we seek to be generous with the gospel, some relationships may be strained or come to an end. Hostility may arise at work, and we may be labeled ignorant or bigoted. Just as sheep should expect difficulty among wolves, we should expect pushback and hardship. Yet, as Rico states, Jesus also intends to turn some of these wolves into his sheep. If you are a Christian, you experienced this very conversion (Eph. 5:8). At one point, we hated the light too, but then we heard the message of the gospel and the Holy Spirit caused us to be born again.

One of the most profound testimonies we have ever heard came from a sweet, little old lady named Ann that we met at a prayer conference. As we sat with Ann during several of the lectures, she was fully engaged with every word the speaker spoke. Whenever the speaker read a Bible verse, she recited the verse along with him from memory, treasuring each word. We began to wonder if there were any Bible verses that she had not memorized. One afternoon at lunch, we asked her how she became a Christian. Based upon her Bible knowledge and zeal for God's word, we would have guessed that she had been raised in a Christian home, hearing the gospel regularly. To our amazement, this precious sister went on to describe her life before coming to Christ. Her testimony was filled with more darkness, sin, and hatred than we could have imagined. Ann went on to rejoice in how the Lord had saved her through her sister sharing the gospel with her. Ann's sister loved her so much that she was willing to cross the pain line for the sake of her sister's soul. One thing that stood out the most about Ann's testimony was her reaction when she first heard the gospel. She said, "When my sister first shared the gospel with me, I hated every word of it. I hated God." Ann went on to share that the Spirit eventually convicted her of the truth of the gospel and led her to put her faith in Christ. Here was a dear sister who had initially rejected the gospel

more fiercely than anyone we had known; yet, our God of Grace still opened her eyes to save her.

When we face the same kind of hostility in our efforts to be generous with the gospel, we should not lose heart. Testimonies like Ann's should remind us to pray and plead for God to open the blind eyes of our lost friends. We should remember that God works in people's hearts behind the scenes, and we can trust that as we share the truth of his Word, he is able and willing to save even the deadest of hearts in the darkest of places (Eph. 2:1-6).

THE PROMISE

When God saves us and makes us alive in Christ, he calls us to lose everything in order to gain everything (Phil. 3:8-10). He calls us to deny ourselves, our preferences, and our comforts in order to generously love and serve others by sharing the gospel with them. He calls us to take up our cross and follow him, even when it means crossing the pain line in order to be a generous friend. Scripture doesn't promise that this life will be void of hardship and trials, but Jesus left us with a promise that should forever change our view on being generous with the gospel. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus establishes the great commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." And then in the very next verse, he gives his disciples (and us) a promise: "*And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" In his kindness, Jesus gave us his commission and did not leave us to carry it out on our own. In that moment when you've decided to boldly share the gospel with your unsaved friend, coworker, neighbor, or family member, you can know that Jesus is going to be right there with you, and he is no stranger to crossing the pain line for God's glory.

Together as a church, may we remember that because of Christ and the gospel, we are the wealthiest in the world. May we remember that we are simply sojourners on earth who have been given the task of being generously open-handed with the gospel that has the power to save. Let us cling to the truth that Christ will be with us as we invite the lost to receive the blessing of knowing him and the riches that are found in him alone.

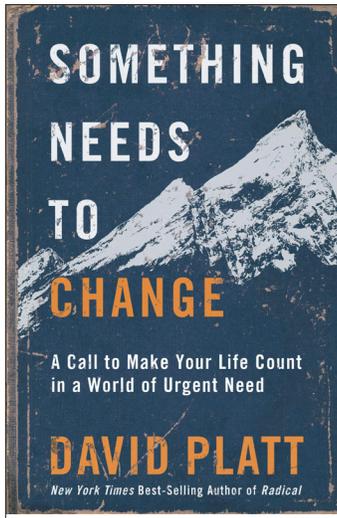
– Ryan & Griffin James

¹ "Friendship for the Busy : Mount Vernon Baptist Church." 26 Jan. 2020, <https://www.mvbchurch.org/resources/sermons/2020/01/friendship-for-the-busy/>. Accessed 18 Feb. 2020.

² "Honest Evangelism (Live Different): Rico Tice, Carl Laferton" Accessed 18 Feb. 2020.

Something Needs to Change

Written by David Platt



Something Needs to Change is a fresh take on how Christians are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in a world plagued with physical and spiritual suffering. David Platt takes the reader through his 7-day trek through remote Himalayan mountains. He writes of the experiences, the people, and the heart conviction he feels at seeing intense physical suffering and spiritual darkness.

There is certainly much to unpack in reading this book and it is refreshing to see Platt's raw emotion and anguish communicated so plainly. He exhorts

believers to resist cloistering themselves away in comforts and luxury and losing sight of the horrors of sin. Platt shares stories of villages robbed of children—sold into sex trafficking, intense persecution of the gospel, and meeting families who watched half their village die to a dysentery epidemic. Platt pleads with us to see what sin does to the world so that we might see it as God does.

As Christians we should strive to meet the physical needs of people, but as a means to meet their spiritual need. Platt drives home that Christians are not philanthropists, we are gospel witnesses. While our lives are to be marked by good fruit, morality, and the desire to help the poor and needy; we need to realize that the ultimate needs of the lost is their condemned spiritual condition. The poor ultimately need Christ and forgiveness, not merely clean water and healthcare.

Platt's final reflections encourage us to examine our hearts and to hold nothing back. Whether it be money, time, houses, our own comfort, or work, we should honestly examine ourselves to see if, like the rich young ruler, we think the cost of following Christ is too high.

Something Needs to Change is an excellent guide to the mindset believers should have. I believe Christians in a western context would benefit and be encouraged by reading this book, particularly two groups of people. First, believers that have grown callous to sin and suffering in the world. Second, believers who are comfortable in their current circumstances. Any believer reading will be spurred on to think about the cost and sacrifice required to follow Christ.

– RECOMMENDED BY ALEX FREEMON

Excerpts From the Book

1

"Repentance is far more important than religion. God makes clear that we can't rest in religion devoid of repentance. And true repentance is evident in the fruit in our lives."

– Day 1: Arrival, p. 18

2

"In the end Aaron and his team have found that it's not beneficial long-term to provide short-term handouts to a few people here and there, creating more problems in the process."

– Day 2: A Long Way to Go Before Dark, p. 46

3

"[T]he physical battles of hunger and sickness in these villages pale in comparison to the spiritual battle for people's hearts and minds."

– Day 6: Like a King Preparing for War, p. 140

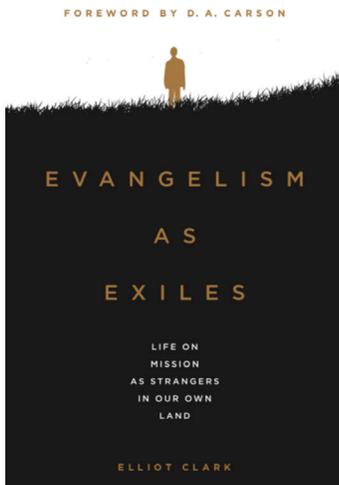
4

"Resolved, to think much, on all occasions, of my own dying, and of the common circumstances, which attend death[.]"

– What Now?, p.204

Evangelism as Exiles

Written by Elliott Clark



The American religious landscape is rapidly changing. The percent of Protestant Christian Americans has decreased from 61% to 48% in the past 30 years. (General Social Survey) We are no longer the majority. In *Evangelism as Exiles*, Elliott Clark states: “the days of attractional evangelism are waning. The times of relying on the gravitational pull of our social standing to bring people into church is all but gone.” (81)

This decline should not cause us to panic, or even grumble.

Marginalization is to be expected in the Christian life, as exemplified by Jesus and our brothers and sisters around the world. A Christian’s identity is an exile with Christ. Clark reminds us that our fear of God should outweigh the fear of any man. And Clark helpfully shares how his gospel witness as a missionary in Central Asia was advanced by dealing respectfully with all.

One of the most striking points from the book was the re-definition of evangelism. American Christians almost exclusively describe evangelism as *sharing* the gospel. Sharing is usually giving something to someone who desires it. As Christians, we need to be willing to follow Biblical examples and *proclaim* the gospel, even when no one is begging us to share the gospel with them.

In addressing controversial topics, Clark advises we carefully pick our battles. If we take offense at every turn or try to address every problem, the dominant message of our discourse will be displeasure or disagreement. “Because as much as people can be won to Christ through our witness, they can also be lost by our words.” (77)

I was personally encouraged and challenged to show concern for others by praying for them. “Nothing demonstrated gentleness and respect quite like praying for someone else in their presence. It shows care for them, It honors them. In doing so we bless rather than curse. [...] When you don’t know what else to say, you can always ask the question, “Can I pray for you?”, then do it right there with them.” (83)

The days of cultural Christianity are coming to an end. Although Christians may lose whatever influence we had in the culture, we know we are still called to proclaim the gospel. This book is a must-read for any believer feeling alienated by America’s rapidly changing landscape or a Christian struggling to speak out and declare the gospel.

– RECOMMENDED BY LIZ FREEMON

Excerpts From the Book

1

“The West is fast becoming post-Christian, post-truth, and perhaps even post-tolerant.”
– Introduction: Embracing Exile, p.23

2

“[W]hen we suffer, if our collective Christian tone is complaint, [...] if we weep and mourn as if Jerusalem has fallen when our chosen political agenda is overlooked, then we expose our true values.”
– The Hope of Glory, p.37

3

“When we seek to do evangelism as exiles, we already have a really hard sell. We’re trying to convince people that a Jewish carpenter was God’s Son, come from heaven to die for our sins. He was buried, and three days later he rose from the dead and now reigns over all. Must we also try to persuade them about matters of history or geopolitics? Do we really want to argue for our opinion on the environment or economics? Or could those hobby-horse topics end up as barriers to Christ’s gospel?”
– With Respect for All, p. 76

4

“Brother and sisters, our exile is normal. But the good news is that our shame and earthly sufferings come printed with an expiration date. They’ll never outlast or outweigh glory. As a matter of fact, even our evangelism is temporary. So let’s be faithful to declare God’s praises while it’s still called today.”
– Conclusion, p. 157

MARCH

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

March 1 Acts 16:16–24

March 2 Psalm 9

March 3 Psalm 7

March 4 Psalm 8

March 5 Psalm 10

March 6 1 Corinthians 1:1–9

March 7 Psalm 11

March 8 Psalm 9

March 9 Psalm 32

March 10 Psalm 30

March 11 Psalm 31

March 12 Psalm 33

March 13 Luke 15:11–24

March 14 Psalm 34

March 15 Psalm 32

March 16 Acts 16:25–40

March 17 Acts 11:1–18

March 18 Acts 11:19–30

March 19 Acts 12:1–19

March 20 Isaiah 25:6–9

March 21 Acts 12:20–25

March 22 Acts 16:25–40

March 23 Acts 17:1–9

March 24 Acts 13:1–12

March 25 Acts 13:13–25

March 26 Acts 13:25–43

March 27 Psalm 18:43–50

March 28 Acts 13:44–52

March 29 Acts 17:1–9

March 30 Acts 17:10–15

March 31 Acts 14:1–18

***Sermons in bold**

TAKE UP & READ



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH