

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

April 29, 2018

Live Such Good Lives

1 Peter 2:12

Prayer: *Father, we just again, we thank you for the incredible miracles that we've witnessed this week. We are just so grateful. I'm a recipient of it, so again just from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for the grace and blessings we have seen poured out. And I just continue to pray that we would see those blessings poured out as we open up your word, as we ask for your Holy Spirit to accompany us, as we continue on this journey, we just pray that you would give us the ability to hear with new ears and that it would be of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we are continuing on this topic that was raised first at the Together for the Gospel conference on the distinctness of the church. And our text this morning is 1 Peter 2:12. It says: *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* Now the word "good" in this passage could just as easily be rendered "beautiful." God is commanding us in this passage to live lives of such beauty that the world even though

they would love to see the opposite has no choice but to see us as different. What God is calling on all of us to do is live lives in which it is obvious to see that God's Holy Spirit is in fact transforming us into the very image of Christ. And we have a fancy theological term for that, we call that "sanctification."

Sanctification is a transformational process. It's where God's Holy Spirit meets us just where we are and begins right there to change our words, our thoughts, and our deeds to line up our spirit with his. You see, God's in the transformation business and life that is transformed into the image of Jesus Christ is what he calls beautiful.

I once had a conversation with someone who said he wanted his life to count for the kingdom and that the local church was the place where he wanted it to count. I said to him, "I can tell you exactly what God wants from you. He wants you to live a beautiful life, a life that even pagans will shake their head at and say there's definitely something to that person's God." And when it comes right -- when it comes right down to it, that is really what all of us want, I mean, we all want to live beautiful lives, meaningful lives, lives that count, and God wants that for all of us. So I'd like to suggest this morning three ways that you can make that happen and they have to do with listening, with learning, and with loving. I can tell you with full confidence, if you

listen, learn and love as God instructs us, you will make your life beautiful.

First is listening. See, a beautiful life starts with listening. I mean if there was one thing that amazed, perplexed and upset the Lord Jesus Christ, it was our inability to listen. Our refusal to hear. It was Jesus who said in *Matthew 13:9*: "*Whoever has ears, let them hear.*" In verse 13 he said: "*This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'*" In verse 18 he said: "*Listen then to what the parable of the sower means.*" In *Mark 4* he said: "*Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.*" In *Mark 6* he instructed the disciples: "*If any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.*" So how do we -- how do we listen? How do we hear? Well, first thing we have to do is we have to sensitize our ears.

If you don't know by now that I truly hate the winter, let me just inform you, I hate the winter. I hate everything about it and it's gotten worse over the years. Janice says my winter hobby is whining about the weather and that's -- that's very true. She's pretty much accurate when it comes to that. But now that spring is approaching, it's funny, but I realize that my hunger for spring has affected my ability to listen. I mean I now hear every new

spring bird arriving and I hear their calls. I mean the other night for the first night in months I heard the glorious sound -- and it was only for a brief moment -- the glorious sound of peepers at night. I've become sensitized to the sounds of spring. I hear things I've never heard before. My capacity to hear has grown. Well, you know, the same process happens on the spiritual plane. We have the same capacity to grow our ability to listen, our ability to hear God, but here's the hard part and here's why I hark on this so much. You see, we sensitize our spiritual ears through prayer. I mean one obvious way that this happens is by praying for our persecuted brothers and sisters. I mean think of the people like Asia Bibi or Gao Zhisheng or Saeed Abedini or even Nabeel Qureshi, and understand that through prayer we have become very sensitized to these people and their lives. You know, I recently saw a news story that mentioned Asia Bibi and it was like her name just leapt off the page. We have become sensitive to her and her plight through prayer. And let me tell you, prayer's not an easy thing to do. Jesus himself said, "*The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak*" and the context of that statement was prayer. It was in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus had asked his disciples for only two things, "*Watch and pray,*" he said. Well, it turned out that was too much to ask. *Matthew 26* says this, it says: *Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" He asked Peter. "Watch and*

pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." You know three times that night Jesus asked for prayer and three times the disciples failed him. Jesus' question was obviously rhetorical because he knew what the answer was going to be and it's probably still a rhetorical question for us because we, too, so often fail at prayer. Prayer tests us, it tests us physically, mentally and spiritually. It is hard work if you are willing to tackle it. Harder still is the way prayer works when it comes to our ability to hear, when it comes to our ability to listen, because prayer takes time and sometimes it takes a lot of time for prayer to have an effect. I mean if you came to a Wednesday night corporate prayer meeting, I suspect, I'll be honest, your first impression might be to think, well, that was a waste. You also might think, well, this was hard, it was boring, it was tiring, kind of felt like it accomplished nothing. But you know, you can say the exact same thing about physical exercise. I mean say you desire to start running because you wanted to lose some weight. And imagine you've just run your first mile and you're stunned and you're angry that you didn't lose five pounds. I mean you might be thinking this is really hard, this is -- this is really tiring and I'm accomplishing nothing. Well the fact is we all know that exercise has to become habitual and only after that happens will you begin to see in the long run some actual changes. Well the same is true with prayer. And the more you

pray, the more your ability to hear and to listen to God will grow. You may not sense it at all at first but just like any type of exercise, it takes persistence and it takes discipline and even God says discipline is not fun. In *Hebrews 12* he says: *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.* I'll be the first one to tell you the discipline of prayer, it is not pleasant at the time but later on it does indeed yield this harvest of righteousness and peace. And part of the harvest is that you begin to hear God with a lot more clarity. I mean it took me years to start hearing the spring birds as they arrived each year but it's been worth it, sort of. It's taken me years to hear God instructing me on living a beautiful life but that's been more than worth it. You see the harvest you get from time invested in prayer is spiritual ears that hear things that literally could not be heard by you before. Please understand me, I'm not talking about hearing voices. I'm talking about what Jesus meant when he said, *"Let him who has ears to hear hear!"*

God's instruction and direction in leading a beautiful life is there for each of us but it's not there if we can't hear it. And hearing or listening is an acquired skill. I was speaking with someone once about something they did for a church member, and what they did was absolutely beautiful, it was thoughtful, it was

helpful, it was kind, and the person that it was done for clearly saw the hand of God in it and so I told this person that he had done a beautiful thing. And here's what he said. He said, "I just did what the Lord was telling me to do." Now did he hear voices? No, he didn't. Did he hear God? Absolutely he did. It's no accident that this person believes in the discipline of prayer. He heard what God was telling him even though no words were spoken because his listening skills were honed by prayer. But listening alone is not enough. We have to listen and we have to learn. I've often been asked the question that if the church's main job is to display the fruits of the Spirit by living these beautiful lives, then why isn't the church known for that? Why is it that the church is known far more for scandals and far more for hypocrisy? Well, actually there's good reasons why the church is not necessarily a place of spiritual beauty. One reason is because it's the focal point of the enemy's attack on God. Understand, God describes the church as the bride of Christ, something that's absolutely precious to him. And it's because the church is so precious to Christ that the enemy wants nothing more than to destroy it. I was once approached by someone who asked me why was it that the local firehouse seems to get along better than many, many churches. Well, I told him I don't think the devil cares that much about wrecking firehouses but he cares an awful lot about doing the maximum damage he can do to the church. Besides churches

are not museums or showcases for the best and the brightest, they are much more akin to hospitals or rehab facilities where people are encouraged to recognize that they're broken. Jesus himself said it's not healthy people who need a doctor but the sick. And it's also a fact that many, many people who regard themselves as healthy psychologically or otherwise, oftentimes they don't feel the need for anything like a church or Christ. Mark 2 says this, describing Jesus, it says: *And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he (Jesus) was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard of it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."* See the church is the place where sinners gather each Sunday to celebrate the one who saved us. They gather to listen, they gather also to learn, to learn how to grow more and more into the image of his Son. See, the church is not -- it's not just a hospital. It's a teaching hospital and part of our job is to learn from that teaching. Sanctification is simply the process of becoming like Christ. And the reason why you don't see everyone in church at the same state of sanctification where everyone is Christ-like and wonderful is because the body of Christ is made up or at least it's supposed to be made up of people from every race, tribe and tongue who may have nothing in common but the fact that Christ has saved

them from themselves. Everybody loves to talk about diversity. Diversity's on everyone's tongue these days, but one of the marks of the church is how diverse every single person is, not necessarily in terms of tribe or tongue but necessarily in terms of their starting points. I mean we all come to Christ with different sets of baggage and we're all at different stages of having those bags checked.

Tim Keller in his book *The Reason for God* gives as good an explanation as I've seen for this. Listen to what he says. He says: "Good character is largely attributable to a loving, safe and stable family and social environment, conditions for which we are not responsible. Many have had instead an unstable family background, poor role models, and a history of tragedy and disappointment. As a result they are burdened with deep insecurities, hypersensitivity, and a lack of self-confidence. They may struggle with uncontrolled anger, shyness, addictions, and other difficulties as a result. Now imagine that someone with a very broken past becomes a Christian and her character improves significantly over what it was. Nevertheless she may still be less secure and self disciplined than someone who was so well adjusted that she feels no particular need for religious affiliation at all. Suppose you meet both of these women the same week. Unless you know the starting points and life journeys of each woman, you could

easily conclude that Christianity isn't worth much, and that Christians are inconsistent with their own high standards. It is often the case that people whose lives have been harder and who are 'lower on the character scale' are more likely to recognize their need for God and turn to Christianity. So we should expect that many Christian lives would not compare well to those of the non religious (just as the health of people in hospitals is comparatively worse than people visiting museums)."

I mean essentially what Keller is telling us is that all of us are on a learning curve in the church and no one really knows the starting point or the end point of this one or that one's progress and no one knows what is acceptable or unacceptable. What we do know is that from the moment each of us is saved, God starts this process of sanctification, which is a fancy way of saying God is going to meet you right where you are right at the beginning to shape and mold you into the image of his Son. Our life journey consists of listening and learning what God's Holy Spirit is trying to teach us. Only God knows the starting points and the end points of that for each of us and that's what we learn in scripture. I mean we read all about the disciples, I mean if you read the New Testament, you will readily see the learning curve that these men were on. Consider what we're looking at this morning. This is Peter's command in his epistle, he says: *Live such good lives*

among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Well, you know, Peter practiced what he preached. Peter listened and he learned and he learned how to live a good life through prayer and the Spirit. You know if you study the life of Peter in the scriptures, you readily see that he started out as a hot-tempered windbag. He ended up patient and meek and gentle and kind. In fact we're here today studying his words about living a beautiful life. We look at the apostle John. The apostle John was originally called a son of thunder for good reason. You know once when Jesus and his disciples were rejected, John had a very novel suggestion. This is found in *Luke 9*. It says: *When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he (Jesus) set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them.* I mean here's John actually approaching Jesus to ask him if he wants to rain fire from heaven because they were poorly received. You see it seems that the thunder part of John's name came from his temper. And John had gotten a little taste of the power that Jesus had given to his disciples and you could tell he was pedal to the metal anxious

to show these two-bit Samaritans who was boss. Jesus wound up rebuking John.

John clearly had a lot to learn. Because he was also a major conniver. You know, he and his brother James tried to pull a fast one on his fellow disciples. Unbeknownst to the rest of the disciples, he and his brother James approached Jesus, this is how Mark's gospel describes it. This is *Mark 10*. It says: *And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" As if he didn't know. And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.*

James and John are actually trying to broker a deal with Jesus behind the other disciples' backs. The good news is that their

faith was so strong that they absolutely believed that Jesus was going to rule in glory. The bad news is that they both sought to do an end around with the other disciples and claim the two places of highest power next to Jesus so they could rule it over the rest of the disciples in Jesus's kingdom. I mean they got an "A" in the faith department; they got a "D" or an "F" in the humility department and their deceptiveness was not lost on the rest of the disciples, I mean scripture was quite clear that the other ten became indignant when they heard. But then we look at the end of John's life and we find that he, too, listened through prayer and that he learned and we see sanctification running its course. Here we find John calling his fellow believers "my dear children" or "my dear lady." And he says in *1 John 3:14*: *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.* You see, when you read John's epistle you encounter a man transformed, a man who listened and learned.

You know the New Testament is filled with examples of how that transformation took place, I mean, we even see the disciples fighting amongst themselves just prior to the last supper. I mean here's Jesus at the most trying time in his entire ministry, he's facing crucifixion, he's facing death and he finds his disciples fighting over the worst possible cause. *Luke 9* says: *An argument*

arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. It's the end of three years of public ministry for Jesus. It's been three years of intense teaching for him and the disciples and now Jesus is facing imminent death and this is what the disciples are fighting over? And yet at the end of each of their lives we see the disciples as tender, loving and living out beautiful lives. And the reason why is that they have listened and learned at the feet of the Master. It is that task, it is the shaping and molding of lives to look more and more like the life of Christ that has now fallen to the church. See, your job is to listen and learn. A large part of our job as the church is to continue the teaching that Jesus started 2,000 years ago. And you know some of it is formal, it's what I'm doing right here, right now from the pulpit, but much of it is informal. Much of it has to do with this whole idea of community. You see we are here to learn from one another. Every one of us in this room has something that we can learn from, has someone we can learn from, and someone that we can teach. And our curriculum has one main subject, it's the text that we're looking at this morning: *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* Here's how I think it works in the church. Let's just say that instead of a church we're not a church, we're a jogging club, we're the Grace Fellowship Fitness Club. Okay? So you join us, you join us at the

beginner's level and you start just by walking. And as you grow more fit, you see others who are further along and they're telling you you can do this. You get encouraged to try jogging and then maybe running and then you find there's more to you than you even thought and someone then challenges you to a 5K race. And suddenly the unthinkable becomes the attempted and it becomes the new you, and it's all because you were encouraged by someone. I love that word "encourage." It means -- to encourage is like the word "enable." It's something that you add to someone. You are literally, when you encourage and enable someone, adding to them courage and ability. You know we want to be enablers in the very best sense of the word and the stakes are far higher than being physically fit. What is at stake here is our eternal souls. And that's what God says in *Hebrews 10:24*, he says: *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* Now understand it is God's grace alone that saves but who you choose to encourage your journey with can make all the difference between a beautiful life that glorifies God and being saved by the skin of your teeth.

I think of my son Ben and his wife Carissa. I mean they've chosen a very good but a very hard pathway adopting kids with physical

challenges. Their church has become famous for its ministry to kids with special needs, and Carissa says, you know, it's Ben who really gets the toughest cases. These are very young kids, 5, 6, 7, 4, 5 maybe. These are kids who are violent and aggressive and oftentimes nonverbal, kids whose families have given up on the notion that they could ever take their kid to church. She says they work one-on-one with these kids and oftentimes within a couple of months these kids are transformed because no one has ever taken the time or effort to encourage and enable them. So those families find this out and they tell other families. They now have 125 new families who have come almost out of the woodwork to attend their respite days which are designed to relieve parents for a day of the stress of raising a disabled child. Many of these families are poor and lots of them barely speak English but they're all invited to this day-long party that demonstrates the love of Jesus. I mean it perfectly fits Jesus's words in *Luke 14*. He says this: *"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* That's a wonderful thing. And you know, I talk with Ben about his life and he says in spite of the stress and the difficulty, I've often heard Ben say on more than one occasion "I love my life." You know Ben and Carissa didn't choose that life in a vacuum. At a critical time in their lives they met a couple in their church who

had adopted nine children with disabilities, and it was this couple that enabled and encouraged them. See, they listened and they learned what God had to say to them through their church. They learned that the hidden treasures of life itself is revealed to those who are willing to trust God wherever he's going to take them. And now Ben and Carissa are the ones doing the encouraging. And part of living a beautiful life is seeing that life being lived out in community. That's what the church is here to do.

Now I believe some of the most important teaching in the church takes place in the nursery, in the kitchen, on the front steps and most notably in the little groups that seem to form right after the church formally ends the service. See the church is far more than a jogging club or a social venue. And more than any other factor, it will shape your understanding of God and the kingdom if you let it. It is literally the physical presence of Jesus Christ on earth. It's where God's kingdom does business on earth and you don't get anything more important than that. And like I said, it's a place where listening and learning often take place but listening and learning alone are not enough. James 1 makes that clear. He says: *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.* In James 2 he says: *Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.* See, faith is not theory. James says it's practice.

So do you want to live a beautiful life? Well first listen to what God is telling you. Develop ears to hear. That takes the hard work and discipline of prayer. Second, learn. And the best way you can learn is by becoming an active part of the community that God has put you in, and again we call that the church. I mean we're here to learn from each other and to teach each other and I can't emphasize that enough. We're about to undertake a new membership class. We're going to be welcoming new members to commit to us as a community so that we can listen and learn from them and they from us. And third, our primary task in living a beautiful life is loving. We listen to learn and we learn to love. And we love according to God's definition of what love is. I mean, we've all heard *1 Corinthians 13* so many times I think we forget what it's trying to say. It says: *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.* You see, living that definition out is the goal of listening and learning. We've been a church now for 25 years and in those 25 years we've had the privilege of being around believers who actually have lived beautiful lives. I could rattle off a bunch of names. Some of them have left the area, some of them have left this life, but all

of them have left their mark on us. None of them have lived perfect lives by a long shot because only Jesus Christ lived that life and he did it so that he could stand in our place condemned for our sin. I mean he lived the beautiful life we were all supposed to live and then he died the ugliest death imaginable, the death all of us deserved to die so that by faith in Jesus we, too, could rise up to eternal life just like he did on Easter Sunday. We are the recipients of the gift of eternal life. It's the greatest gift anyone could ever receive. In addition to that we have the privilege of growing and maturing that gift in others through Christ's body here on earth. Now can you do it on your own? I know lots and lots of people think that today. Perhaps you can do it on your own but you can't avoid the fact that Christ wants you to grow not as a lone ranger but as a member of his body, the church. I've had more than one person tell me their struggle is they just don't like people in general and they struggle with the people who make up the church. I get it, we're a motley crew here, but that's by design. We are a spiritual teaching hospital and everybody in this room is broken in one way or another, so what do you expect? So my only advice is get over it, suck it up. Ask God for the grace to love folks you just might not like because without that love, there is very little evidence of salvation. Again *1 John 3:14: We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides*

in death. So loving your brothers and sisters in Christ really is a matter of life and death. And that love has a practical application. Again, it's God who says: Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

You see, we can stimulate one another to live beautiful lives by listening first through prayer to what God is saying, by learning through teaching from God's word formally and informally and loving by God's definition someone you might not like at all. You see it's here in the church that we learn and listen through prayer, it is here in the church that we learn first from some and others to teach and we learn God's definition of love and beauty and it's here in the church that we get nurtured and grow in the world that grows more and more hostile each and every day. This is the place that we plant ourselves so that love can grow uniquely and individually so that we can *live such good lives among the pagans, that though they accuse us of doing wrong, they may see our good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for this church. I thank you for how it represents the physical presence of Christ on earth. I particularly thank you for the help and the encouragement that

you've been to a particularly difficult week for our family. Lord, we just sense your presence through your church. What a marvelous thing that you've done. We thank you for it, Lord, and I pray for each and every one of us that we would have a renewed respect, love and admiration for what you've done in creating the idea of the body of Christ of the church. Give us a passion and a hunger for serving and communicating and being part of this body, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.