

Creating a Welcoming Culture to Persons with Disabilities Pt 2

A More Welcoming Place

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I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 12, continuing a series we began last Sunday. The title of the message is "Creating a Welcoming Culture, Creating a Welcoming Culture to Persons with Disabilities" is the full title. Creating a welcoming culture to persons with disabilities. I shared last time that this has been a subject that I've studied as part of my doctoral ministry project and it's been a real blessing to look at this issue. We preached last Sunday on this topic, looking at how the world has conformed our thinking and this morning we want to continue to look at it. Yesterday, thankful to those who came out for the seminar here at the church. The Lord blessed it, seemed to go much better than I expected and I trust that God is going to use it to help our church to be more the place he wants it to be and to become, I love what I shared with them yesterday, that Joni and Friends, Joni Eareckson Tada's ministry, Joni and Friends is one of the primary things they focus on is helping churches develop disability ministries and to cultivate this kind of culture where you welcome persons with disabilities with open arms. And so they have a series called "The Irresistible Church" series, and I'd like for our church to become an irresistible church like that where persons with disabilities, but also just persons with great needs would see this place as a place of refuge because Jesus is that way, where Jesus is, sinners know there's welcome and we want our church to be like that.

So that's our prayer that the Lord will use his word to transform our hearts and to make us people individually that have welcoming hearts. A true welcoming heart doesn't affirm someone in their misery and keep them in their misery. You see them in distress, you want to deliver them from the distress if you have compassion as the Bible sees it. Compassion in the world is to affirm people no matter where they are and what they're doing. That's not compassion. That's not love. Compassion, if you see someone in distress, you want to relieve their distress. You want to alleviate their suffering and the way you alleviate the suffering of sinners is you lead them to Jesus Christ to repent of their sins and to turn from them. That's what we're called to do, and I think there's an amazing parallel between, I mentioned this some last week, but you'll see this as you read through the gospels carefully. Neal mentioned John 9 and John 8. I appreciate you reiterating my homework assignment, brother. Thank you very much. If you didn't do that, that's your homework, you're behind a week in homework. You may have some more today, but you've got to work on that too. John 8 and 9, the point there being that

that man born blind that Jesus healed and Neal shared, he said, "I don't know fully who this man Jesus is but I do know this, I was blind and now I see." It comes right after Jesus says, "I'm the Light of the world. He who believes in Me will not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life." And what he's showing us in that is that the physical disability of blindness, a man born blind, is actually in this providence of God, because he says, "Why was this man born blind?" The disciples asked him that, "Why was this man born blind? Was it his parents' sin or his sin?" Jesus says, "Neither, but for the glory of God." He said, "The reason this man was born blind was so that I could demonstrate My power and My power is not just in merely healing physical blindness. The power I want to demonstrate is I have the power to heal spiritual blindness. I have the power to heal those who were born dead in their sins who cannot see God, cannot see themselves, cannot see as things really are, are completely dead spiritually, and I have the power to call them to life and to call them to see." And so what we see is this principle that physical disabilities in the New Testament are a window into the life-altering power of Jesus Christ. He takes those who can't see and he makes them able to seek. He takes those who can't walk and makes them able to walk. You can't walk spiritually either. You and I are immobilized spiritually. We can do nothing. We have no ability to do anything good and Jesus takes you and I who were crippled, and he makes us able to dance and to walk and to run for the glory of God. So the physical disabilities you're going to see this as you read the New Testament and look at that and see what God is teaching us. This is why the physical healing is really secondary. It's the spiritual healing that we need and it's the true miracle.

Well, I want us to look at this continuing subject of cultivating a new culture, a welcoming culture, and I do want to say a word of just kind of bookkeeping business that I need to go over. I was so blessed by all, so many of you took the pre-survey. You know, part of my project is to do some research related to how this impacts the church and so we did a pre-survey and we're going to do a post-survey, and I would really like to ask you, you can really minister to me if you take the post-survey as soon as the service is over or certainly by 6:00 PM tonight because what I've got to do is take all those post-surveys and do some analysis on them, and the longer you wait, the longer I have to wait to get started on that work, and I hope to finish my writing by Wednesday evening before church. Hoping going after church and still be writing but knowing me, I probably will. But anyway, if you could do that, that'd be a blessing. And there's going to be, there's signs outside of I think all around there's in the bulletin insert, it's got the barcode. It'll open up, you can take that survey as soon as service is over, it'll be open to take it. And anyway, appreciate you helping out with that.

The purpose of it is, you know, not just to get, I mean the issue of getting a degree, so, so secondary. I really don't care about that. It's been a great blessing to study biblical counseling in the program, and it's been a great blessing to look at this particular issue. The Lord has really just opened my heart in ways and I think he's going to open the hearts of our church in deeper ways to be a place that is welcoming. So if we're welcoming to persons with disabilities, what we're going to see is we're going to be more welcoming to persons with profound spiritual disabilities, that is, to profound sinners. We'll be a place if they can come, people like you see Jesus welcoming tax collectors and

prostitutes, and they're being transformed. They don't stay in their sin, they're changed. We want to be a place like that, that God can send the most difficult cases and see them transformed by the power of his grace.

Now with that said, 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Part of helping us have a culture of welcoming persons with disabilities is to understand the grace of God in such a way personally that it makes us more approachable. One of the amazing things about Jesus is how approachable he was. He is the living God who in glory dwelt in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes, and yet when the Word became flesh, the Word becomes flesh, he is Holy, Holy, Holy in his essential being, and yet he is approachable because of his abounding grace. And the Pharisees marveled at this. They were like, "How can this be the Messiah when He is surrounded by sinners and tax collectors?" There was something about Jesus. You know, see the woman at the well, a Samaritan woman, a woman who had been married five times and was living with a man who wasn't her husband, and yet she has a conversation with the Lord of glory and her heart is changed.

The approachability of Jesus. What makes us more approachable is learning to think God's thoughts after him and become like him. And so this morning I want us to see how much we need persons with disabilities in our congregation. And we're going to see this because we, the church is a body. 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Let's read the text together.

12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. 19 If they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 But now there are many members, but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Let's pray.

Our Father, we come to You now, Lord, asking that the opening of Your word might bring blessing to us. We pray that You might send forth Your light and Your truth. Let them lead us to Your holy hill, to the place of Your habitation and in Your presence may we be changed. May we love You more truly, more earnestly, more deeply, and may we become more like Your Son. We pray in His wonderful name. Amen.

The keyword I want you to think about this morning that I think this passage illustrates is the word "need." Necessary was the actual way it was rendered in the new American Standard translation that I was reading from. Those which are weaker are actually more necessary. We think they're weaker, but in reality they're more necessary, more needful. The idea is that which you cannot do without, is the meaning of the word. We think it's weak, it's unable, it's unable to help, but in reality it's much more necessary.

This word "need," because there are two points this morning and they both revolve around the word "need." I'm going to just going to give you both points right up front. The persons with disabilities need the church, that's the first point. Persons with disabilities need the church. The second point is the church needs persons with disabilities and I think this is illustrated in this passage in a beautiful way. The big picture of this passage, the word picture is that the church is a body, one body with many members, many parts. God has put the parts into the body as he desired, and one of the things he's done is he's made those that seem to be weaker, that seem to be less honorable, that seem to be less presentable, and he's granted more value and more honor, and he wants us to do the same. In the same way every member needs the body.

The big picture here is how can any member of the body of Christ live disconnected from the body? Persons with disabilities need the church because every Christian needs to be vitally, organically connected to the body. In the mind of the New Testament writers, it is in, listen to this, in the mind of the New Testament writers, it is inconceivable for a Christian to live disconnected from the church. You read your New Testament carefully, there's no other conclusion. This passage makes that explicitly clear. Can you imagine a part of your body being disconnected and then I'm going to just live that way? My foot goes on strike and says, "I want nothing to do with you, Ty," and it just goes and lives over there. It would be kind of gross and that's kind of a gross word picture, but let's, I'm sorry I even said that. Sometimes things come into my mind and they come out of my mouth before my mind filters it. But anyway, think about a foot, though, separated, living, trying to live. What's going to happen? It's going to rot, decay, and die. It won't take long at all. It's gone.

It's unthinkable for a part of the body to live separated from the body. This is one of the reasons that metaphor is so predominant in the New Testament. Ephesians 4 makes this same point, that the way that we are to live the Christian life is by vital, organic, living connection to one another. Ephesians 4:11-16 makes this point where he says, he's given some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastor teachers for the

equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, and then he says, basically what's happening is as we are speaking the truth in love to one another, we are connecting, we're all doing our parts, we're growing together into a corporate representation of Jesus. Read that passage. That's your homework for today. Read Ephesians 4:11-16 and see that word picture being lived out. You and I are to come together. We're all to become individually, like Jesus. Yes, we are. Other passages talk about that. That's what discipleship is following Jesus, becoming like him. But there's a sense in which the New Testament is saying we are also to grow together to look like Christ, and there's something majestic and powerful about this corporate transformation that happens that when an unbeliever comes in among us, he says surely God is here because the presence of Christ is so evident in our fellowship in our oneness.

Well, how can any Christian live separated from that? And one of the things I shared last week that is just, it is an obvious fact in the Bible-believing church today that persons with disabilities are under-represented in our congregations and when they are here, they're under-involved, that not everyone, of course, but there is a significant gap. This is one of the things that so many folks are concerned about and it's so wonderful that the Lord has raised up this issue. I shared last week, if you weren't here, how I was able to be at a conference in December of 2017, the Biblical Counseling Coalition, and hear Joni Eareckson Tada, who was a woman who became a quadriplegic, lost the use of all four limbs in a diving accident on July 30th of 1967. She dove into the Chesapeake Bay and her neck was broken and she instantly at age 17 became a quadriplegic. And she has now been used by God in a mighty way to start an awareness of disabilities and ministry to persons with disabilities in the church for the last 55 years. That's just extraordinary.

I showed the video yesterday she sent out on July 30th, think about this, July 30th, 2022, she sent out a video asking folks to celebrate with her the 55th anniversary of her accident. How can that be? Because she has applied her theology. She understands that, yes, in one sense, in a perfect world, if sin had never entered the world, there would not be anything like quadriplegia, but in a world that is wracked by sin God has subjected the world to futility, we talked about this last week, and therefore there has to be suffering and God brings things into our lives, suffering into our lives to remind us of eternity, to help us to bear one another's burdens, and he uses hurtful things to bring about wonderful, glorious, blessed things. And she's come to see that this was God's plan for her. She embraced it years ago after years of struggling with it the first few years, she fully embraced it and she has become a woman that just manifests the victorious grace of Jesus Christ in her suffering.

And so she was saying, "Celebrate with me God's plan," and she shared how Genesis 50:20, and this is a great verse for interpreting when bad providential things happen we think are bad, and in some sense they are, it's bad for someone to lose the ability to move, but on the other hand, God turns it for good. She shared Joseph's words to his brothers. Remember Joseph when he shared with his brothers who had sold him into slavery in Genesis 50, after their father Jacob has died, they think now they're going to get it, "He's just been waiting to lower the boom on us. We deserve to be made prisoners or killed because of what we did. We were willing to kill him, willing to sell him into

slavery." And Joseph says, "Why are you afraid? Yes, what you meant for evil what you did to me, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good," and he says, "to bring about the saving of many lives. You see, God was doing this. God was working. He was sending me ahead of you into Egypt so that I then could be used by God to provide for you in this time of famine. I see God had a good purpose for it." And so Joni was saying, "That's what happened. The Lord was using what He did in my life to bring about the salvation of many people and the help of many people." And she fully embraced that and that's the glory of God that he does things like this.

And she's been helpful to help us remember that persons with disabilities need the church. They need to be connected into the body life of the church. They need to have relationships, even persons with intellectual disabilities where we can't understand each other as well as we would like, they can't make themselves known, we still need to be investing and pouring into their lives because every person needs vital connection to the body.

You know, turn with me just to a couple of places, Colossians 3:16. So a couple of examples of how we're shown to need the church. This is the normal daily life of the people of God, Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." Every Christian needs to have the word of Christ dwelling in them, but this actually isn't speaking singularly. When we interpret that, we often think let the word of Christ dwell in me richly, I need to meditate on the word. I need to think about the word. Yeah, the Bible does say that you need to do that, but this passage isn't talking about meditation or memorization because it says, when it says let the word of Christ dwell richly within you, that "you" is a plural "you." It's not a singular. It's a plural you. Let the word of Christ dwell within you all richly. This is again the superiority of southern English versus northern English, right? Let the word of Christ dwell richly within y'all. For all y'all. That means a lot of you, right? We are so precise in our language.

But that's the sense, it's let the word of Christ dwell within the group of you and how do you do that? You teach and admonish one another. You speak the word to each other. You're involved in real relationships where you're encouraging one another from the Scriptures. You're challenging one another from the Scriptures. You're saying, "Listen, in this area of your life, how are you doing here? Let's talk about that. Don't you think that you need to think about this?" And you talk about the Scriptures. This is the beauty of the word of God. We're all called to that kind of relationship with one another and with the Scriptures, how good God is to provide for us. And so we all need that. Every person needs that.

And then another metaphor that shows how unthinkable it is for people to be separated from the church, Christian believers to be separated from the church, just the metaphor of the sheep and the sheep and the flock. The sheep and the flock. Matthew 18:12-14 Jesus says, this is right before he goes into church discipline in verses 15-20, and he shows the

heart behind church discipline, is Jesus going after lost sheep. That's exactly what happens when the church exercises discipline over unrepentant sinners, it's Jesus actually going on a rescue operation through his people. But the context for that, verses 12-14 says this, "If any man has 100 sheep and one of them strays and he loses one, will he not leave the 99 in the fold and go after the one until he finds it, and then rejoice over the one more than over the 99? I tell you, when your brother sins, go to him and show him his fault." So the idea is we are a flock, we're part of a flock of sheep. Sheep are not meant to be loners. A lone sheep is some animal's meal. That's it. Sheep are flock animals. They're to be kept together. There's safety in numbers and so it is with believers. We're meant to be connected. It's dangerous to be separated.

One other passage that illustrates the danger, the spiritual profound spiritual danger, and why every Christian, and particularly believers with disabilities, need the church is Hebrews 3:12 and 13. The author of Hebrews is very concerned that the believers not fall away from the faith in times of persecution and difficulty. Then, when difficulty comes, it makes it hard to believe. It makes it hard to hold on. He says in Hebrews 3:12, he says, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." Take care. Watch out. Watch over one another because it's easy for an evil unbelieving heart to lead one to fall away. And how do you watch over each other? Verse 13, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." We need other believers to encourage us. We need to encourage other believers. We need to look after each other.

So we need to be a part of a community where we're being looked after by other believers and where we're looking after other believers. This is the Christian life. So we have to find a way to make persons with disabilities welcome into our congregation so that this kind of care happens. It's non-negotiable. We have to do it because of the great need. A sheep alone is subject to the wolves. A body part disconnected will atrophy and die. Persons with disabilities desperately need the church, and you think about it, they, persons with disabilities have greater levels of suffering in areas that we don't. I mean, we all have levels of suffering that there are other, you know, illnesses, we have job losses, all kinds of ways we suffer and we all suffer, and that's one of the things that helps us to relate to one another, we're all sufferers in a fallen world, but there's measures of suffering that they have that make it an even more profound need to be encouraged and exhorted to faith, and encouraged to hold onto Jesus in the midst of their difficulty.

So persons with disabilities need the church. Secondly, though, the church needs persons with disabilities. Back to 1 Corinthians 12. The church needs persons with disabilities because we need every single member. It's not just that the member needs to be connected, the body needs every member. That's the clear implication of the passage. In fact, that's the main thrust. In fact, he raises a couple of different scenarios where the body is not functioning correctly. He says there's a temptation for some members of the body to think that they're not really valuable members of the body. You see this in verses 14-16 or particularly verse 15, "If the foot says, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body.'" You see, the foot's having an identity crisis. He's thinking, "I really wish I

were a hand. I mean, look what the hand gets to do." I mean, think about it. That's really a good illustration, isn't it? Think what your hand does that your foot doesn't do. Some people have very talented feet. My wife has very talented feet. My daughter and my son both. I don't have talented feet. They can pick things up with their feet. You know, that comes in handy at certain times when you're doing something else. Anyway, I'm sorry. Again, the filter. Sorry, honey. Pray for me. But your hand gets to hold the food that goes into your mouth. The foot never gets to do that unless you're, even for my family, they don't do that.

So the hand has a more glamorous position. The hearing says to itself, "Because I'm hearing, I'm an ear, I wish I were an eye because the eye has a more glamorous position." And he says this to say, "Listen, don't despise the place and role that you have, because wherever you are, you are performing an essential, valuable service to the body." So here it's about personal identity. We can despise our role, and God is saying do not despise your role. Why? Because God gave you your role. To despise it is to despise the providential governance of God, and that is, on its face, absurd. But then, he says, it's not just how we see ourselves, it's how we see one another. In verse 21 he says, "the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" You see, now it's the various parts of the body looking at other parts of the body, not with envy, but with disdain. The eye says, "Look, I don't need you, hand." Or again, the head could say to the feet, "I have no need of you," and the Scripture says this is absurd. On the contrary, the opposite is true. Even though the head may think it doesn't need the feet, even though the eye may think it doesn't need the hand, in reality, the opposite is true, the eye needs the hand way more than it can even imagine. The head needs the foot way more than it can even imagine. In fact, the verbiage as the passage flows creates this sense of surprise and reversal, that that which seems to be less honorable is actually way more honorable. That is way more valuable. And that which seems to be weak is actually much more value to the body.

In fact, look with me at that for a minute, verse 22. That's where you begin to see this. "On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary." Seem to be, that is, thought to be. It's the verb here has the idea of seeing something, appraising it, valuing it. And so we look at a member and we say this is a weak member. The idea of weak here means just unable. In fact, it's used in chapter 11 in parallel to the word "sick." Some of you are sick and weak because of your taking of the Lord's supper in unworthy manner. You become sick and weak, and the idea is feeble, unable to contribute anything. In chapter 11, verse 30, that's what was happening to members of the body but here he's saying, "Look, we think something is weak, unable to contribute, and therefore we place very low value on that but in reality that member we think is weak is absolutely necessary. It is so needful that you can't do without it." That's the force of the language in verse 22.

And then he continues on, "those members of the body which we deem less honorable," and the word "deem" is actually the same verb as the word "seem" in verse 22, that is, we look at it, we appraise it, we value it, and the ones that we deem as less honorable, and the idea here is value, significance, worth, those that we deem less honorable, verse 23, "on these we bestow more abundant honor." In fact, this praise "more abundant" is a

word which carries with it great emphasis. It's the word "perusseuos," which means "to abound; to have a surplus." It means "exceeding; abundant; superabundant." So we think it has less honor, but in reality we bestow over and above and beyond honor to it if we're thinking rightly. We thought it was less valuable, but in reality it was more valuable than we ever imagined.

That's the force of what Paul is saying and then he takes it, he says the same thing three times, and that's taken it to the superlative degree. He's like, "You've got to get this." Verse 22, the weaker are necessary. Verse 23, first part of verse 23, the second time he says it, those that we deem less honorable are more over and above and beyond honorable. And then the second half of verse 23, less presentable becomes over and above and beyond presentable. And this word "presentable" is really something. Literally the word "not presentable, unpresentable" in verse 23, the second half, the New American standard says, "less presentable." Other translations say "unpresentable," NIV, ESV. The word means "without form" literally in the Greek and is often used to say deformed. It's that which you don't want to present. It's not attractive or comely because it's deformed, it's not formed properly. He says those members which are unpresentable because they're deformed in our view, in reality are the most beautiful and comely if we were seeing rightly. You see he said that three times, those which are weaker are necessary. Those which seem to be less honorable are over and above and beyond honorable. Those which are less presentable and deformed are, in reality, over and above and beyond comely and beautiful.

This is such an amazing reality and it has implications not just for obviously for disabilities. It's talking about the spiritual nature. It's talking about all of that, but it certainly applies in the area of persons with disabilities. Those that we would see to be weak are necessary. Those that we see to be of less value, what can they really contribute, they can actually contribute more than all. Those that are less beautiful, if seen rightly, are actually more beautiful. How can this be? This is gospel language and it shows the power of grace. In fact, turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12. We were in 1 Corinthians 12. Just turn over to 2 Corinthians 12 because the principle is really right here in this passage about Paul's thorn in the flesh. This is what brings beauty, true beauty. It's not what we possess naturally, but it's what we possess by grace. That's what makes us truly comely. That's what makes us truly formed as we should be formed, grace.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7 says, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me to keep me from exalting myself!" We don't know what the thorn is. There are various theories. The Bible doesn't tell us. It seems to be something physical. He says this thorn in the flesh. It was some kind of painful circumstance, some kind of great physical difficulty, some kind of potential physical disability. He needed, he thought, for God to remove this so that he could be more effective. So verse 8 says, "Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'" That is the principle. Grace operates in the context of a realization of the great need of your great need for grace. The more you know you need grace, the more

able you are to receive grace. The more grace you have, the more beautiful you are in the eyes of God, and the more beautiful you should be in the eyes of God's people who are trying to think like God.

So those who need grace receive grace and so this is why Joni Eareckson Tada is such a beautiful person spiritually because she needs grace. But I heard a pastor share one time he had gone to the same principle, he went to Ghana on a mission's trip and he was actually kind of associated with Joni and Friends, and he was ministering in a church that had a number of persons with disabilities and in Ghana they don't have the American with Disabilities Act like we have in America and they don't have accommodations made in this particular country, in this city that they were going to poor people with disabilities. They're shunned and separated and ignored by their families and by society largely. But there are Christians there ministering, and people are being saved and these people who are seen as untouchable, in a sense, by the society are becoming beautiful trophies of grace.

And anyway, this man, this American goes there and, of course, you know, you go on a mission trip to help the people you're going to serve, right? But so often you find that you need what they have more than they need what you have. He comes and he meets this African pastor, this Ghanaian pastor who is ministering there among the people and he meets him and this is his welcome, he says, "Welcome, my brother, to Ghana where our God is bigger because we need him more." There's a lot of truth in that, isn't there? Our God is the all-sufficient one, El Shaddai, God Almighty. His majestic glory is made known to those who need it.

And so there's a capacity for persons with disabilities to see their need much more profoundly and in that to be recipients and trophies of his grace in a much more glorious way. And this is what makes them so valuable to the church. At that conference, the man, one of the men from Joni and Friends, she had shared her testimony and, you know, so moving, hearing her just recount at that point 50, 50 years, right after the 50th anniversary of her accident, 2017. It was just so powerful and I was talking to one of the men on the staff and he said, "Can you imagine how much we would have lost if the Lord had not given us Joni Eareckson Tada and her life story? How much the Evangelical Church would have lost." And because I'd heard her testimony a number of times, I've been blessed by it, almost always struggle with tears and just marvel at the grace that emanates through her. And when he said that and he went on to say this, "And then how much is the church, how much are our churches missing because these kinds of people aren't actively, organically involved in the body life of the church?" That is a question that is open that we need to pray that God would answer. Open wide our mouth that he might fill it. Lord, give us every measure of grace that we need to become welcoming and help us then to walk beside one another through the difficulties and the challenges because it's hard. It's not easy, but let us rejoice in the challenge of it.

More abundant honor because more abundant grace. Think about Paul. He wrote half of the New Testament, virtually half the New Testament the Apostle Paul wrote it. Why? I think it's because he was such a great sinner. That's my theory. I don't have Scripture to

back that up, but I mean not explicit Scripture, I think implicitly it's a good argument though. He calls himself the chief of sinners. He was a persecutor of the church, and he does say himself, "The reason that God chose me like this was to show the riches of His grace upon one who had been so opposed to Him, and he turned, Saul the persecutor around and makes him Paul the apostle, the apostle who had been this Pharisee, this Jew of Jews, Pharisee of Pharisees, becomes the door to the Gentiles. Unthinkable to the Jews. He's the one that God transforms to take the gospel to the Gentiles. This trophy of his grace, and he lets him write half of the New Testament so that there's a sense in which the other apostles, I think kind of are wondering at it. I mean Peter when he says in 2 Peter, he says, "Some of the things Paul writes are hard to understand," but he's talking about what a great, you know, apostle he is, and, "You've got to study his stuff but sometimes it's hard to understand." Because Paul understands things you don't understand, Peter. I mean, it's just a fact. The Lord just did something in this man that was... and listen, Peter wrote Scripture. I mean, Peter knows so much more than we do.

I'm not trying to give Peter a hard time but isn't it amazing the ways of God. Think about this, the honor God gives to those that are so surprising to us. Who would have thought that a man who persecuted the church would become, in a sense, the greatest apostle? What kind of God does that? A God of matchless infinite grace who loves to display the glory of his grace. Here's another thing. You know, in the first century, a woman's testimony was not valued very much, certainly not in Jewish culture, first century Jewish culture. And the testimony of a sinner, think about this, who was the first person, who was the person God honored to be the first human being to see the resurrected Christ? Mary Magdalene. First one to lay eyes on the risen Christ was a woman who had been possessed by seven demons. A woman who was known as a prostitute. She was the one who heard Jesus say, "Mary." What honor and value God places on the most unlikely. How that must have just wracked the minds of the even the apostles. And I know they did like we're doing now, "All glory to Jesus." Surely he would appear to Peter, now Peter gets there pretty quickly, he gets to the tomb and then the Lord ministers to him in a wonderful way, because God ministers to all of his people. Jesus loves all of his people, but isn't it amazing how he places greater value in some ways on the people we think less valuable? Because what is most valuable of anything for any single human being is we need grace and if you don't know you need grace, oh, how much you need his grace to help you see your need. Ask him to show you how much you need him. Tell him you're blind, and, "Lord, show me grace," and he will hear that prayer. "I want to want to be humble. I want to want to be broken." Pray for it. That is a humble prayer. God can't resist humility but he resists pride.

So you see, the Lord, he's ordered his church. He's orchestrating his church. This way he's going to continue to be like he's always been. He wants to bring people into his church who are the most deformed spiritually and make them trophies of grace. And then we will see that grace and we will love them and they will be so beautiful to us, that this isn't some kind of, you know, just mental pretend thing we're doing here by valuing the weaker more than the strong. No, we're doing it by faith, trusting God and then we will come to see, "Yes, Lord, yes, Lord, they are more valuable."

So the disabled person who can't speak, can they make a contribution to the church? They can make a greater contribution than anybody else if God chooses for it to be that way. And you think about that, you see the grace but listen what happens. When a disabled person that needs help in lots of ways comes into a family, what happens to that family, even a natural family, an unbelieving family? We were talking about this Patti and I, last week. She mentioned Joc Pederson, do you guys remember last year the Braves played, the guy that wore the pearls? Remember him? He was anything but a Christian. I mean, I pray that he'll get saved. And he did a lot of good for us, you know, I'm a Braves fan. I was very happy we won the national championship and the World Series in the same year if you're a Georgia fan. I mean, anyway, sorry, I digress. Joc Pederson. In many ways he appears to be an ungodly man, if you've seen it, the way he carries himself, but you know, it was really interesting is Joc Pederson has a disabled, has a brother with disabilities, Champ, he was born with Down Syndrome. And Joc when he was with the LA Dodgers and they won the World Series, he always had his brother Champ with him in all the celebrations. In fact, Champ got to throw out the first pitch at a Dodgers game. If you watched the parade when the Braves were doing their parade, there was Champ on the truck with Joc because there's something about seeing need like that, that common grace, God's common grace, the image of God in fallen sinners who are living for themselves, separated from God, there's something powerful about common grace at work when you see need, and that's what's happened. There's a sensitivity in that man that he wouldn't have had otherwise.

So he was blessed by having a brother with a disability and you see this in so many cases. You know people that you know, you see a young man and you find that he's especially sensitive, may not be a believer, and you find out, "Oh, he's got a sibling or he's got a parent with a disability." Now you put a person with disabilities in the body of Christ where the Spirit of God is, where the love of Christ has been shed abroad in our hearts, and look what God can do in changing people, in making us more sensitive and making us able to serve one another. And what happens when you move toward people who are in need with the grace of God and you do it even though you're uncomfortable, and you do it though you don't know what to say, and you do it because you just want to show the love of Christ, and you're going to apologize when you mess up, when you say things wrong, when you do things wrong, but you move toward them with the power of God, God will do things and he will impact them, but you will find that he will change you in the process.

He changes us. He makes us different as we learn to care for one another. That's why God has composed the body this way, so that there will be no division in the body. As he says, he makes us where we think we need one another, in reality, what we come to find out is you need me. No, I needed you. How much I needed you. How grateful I am to God for you. Do you see that? Less honorable becomes superabundant over and beyond honored in our hearts. God does this to show the glory of his grace and this, think about how that makes a church welcoming and our hearts welcoming to people with physical disabilities, with intellectual disabilities, but even more so with profound spiritual disabilities, because everyone in this world is spiritually disabled. Some have made such a wreck of their lives that the people around them have given up hope, but this is a place where they

can come and find hope. They can find open arms of embrace if people here know, we know it's only by his grace that we are what we are, and we know his grace is sufficient. You've got lots of need, we know a Savior who has more than abundant grace. That's what we want to be, individuals who serve one another, love one another, value one another, and make a welcome for any person because we want to be like Jesus.

Let's go to Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your amazing, amazing, amazing grace. Lord, we know that we, all of us are sinners and unworthy. If we saw ourselves rightly, we would see how deformed we are and how in need of grace. We thank You that Your grace is moreover, above and beyond sufficient to transform us more and more into the image of Jesus, to make us look more and more like You have made humanity to be, to make us more and more the men and women, boys and girls, that You made us to be.

Father, we confess that we lack faith. We are weak in faith. We don't believe that we are able to minister to others with profound need, but in reality, we're not able in ourselves which makes us perfectly able through Your grace. Help us be people who learn to lean on the arms of Jesus continually, the same way that we're saved when we realize we can't do anything for ourselves, we can't make ourselves righteous, we can't reform our lives, we can't change in any way to make ourselves acceptable to You, we have to cast ourselves upon Christ and His finished work, His death, His sacrifice paying for the sins of everyone who would ever believe, the sufficiency of His blood, we must trust in that and that alone, in His glorious resurrection power. In the same way that we trust in Him for salvation, we trust in Him for sanctification. We're to come every day confessing, "Lord, here I am, helpless, unable, unable to love those I should love, unable to care for those I should care for, unable to serve those I should serve. Lord Jesus, help me. Give me Your heart. Give me Your power." And, Lord, You will make us different. You will make us able because You are the all-sufficient One. You love to show Yourself mighty in the hearts of people who are humble. So continue to make us ever more humble so that Your glory can rest on Your people, upon Your church. Make our church a place that welcomes persons of all ability level physically, intellectually, and most of all, Lord, all persons spiritually who are profoundly disabled, their need of Christ. Do these things for the glory of Your Son. We pray this in His name. Amen.