

Beloved: Expectation and Affirmation

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[0 : 0 0] Well, welcome to all of you. Welcome to Advent, the Brooklyn Parish for Sunday morning worship. We are in a series for the last few weeks in a book in the Old Testament called The Song of Songs, or some people call it The Song of Solomon. It's a song, Old Testament poetry, written by King Solomon late in his life, and it's a vision of an ideal marriage. It doesn't reflect his actual life. It reflects a divinely inspired vision of marriage as it ought to be, between Solomon and a woman known only as the Shulamite woman, his bride. And yet, even though it is idealized, over the last few weeks we've found that it is also tremendously practical, relevant, and realistic. And so we've been using it as a guide to learn about intimacy, the kind of intimacy we were made to have with one another and the kind of intimacy we were made to have with God. We're trying to learn about that by reading this book together. We acknowledge that we live in a society that is at the same time over-connected and over-sexualized, and right along with that we are starving for intimacy.

So we've realized that intimacy is about more than just being connected or being sexually liberated, that it's something altogether different. And so that's what we're trying to discover here.

So each week we're looking at what it takes to build healthy intimacy with others and with God, in this week we come to this section of the Song of Songs, chapter 5, verse 2, through chapter 6, verse 1. And as we've done every week, we're going to read through this together, and along the way I'm going to draw out two points. One behavior that hurts our relationships, and then one behavior that actually helps and strengthens our relationships. So as we get started, let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank you for the gift of relationship. As we look at creation and your nature as a Trinitarian being, and your creation of us, we know that from our very earliest moments of existence we were created for relationship, for one another and for you. And so we pray that these words on this page would be empowered by the Spirit to enable us not just to understand intellectually, but rather to begin to experience and to live with the kind of intimacy we were made to have with each other, with our wives, our husbands, our friends, our children, our church community, and then ultimately with you, that we would not only know your love intellectually, but that we would feel it. We pray this in the power of your Spirit, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. So we're going to begin reading together, and I'll draw out a couple of things, help you understand what's going on, and then we'll get into what this actually says to us.

So chapter 5, verse 2, this is the beginning of another dream sequence. It's very similar to a dream that this woman had earlier in the book. And as we've said before, this is a song, and so it has three parts. There's the woman's part, the man's part, and then the chorus comes in every now and then.

[3 : 24] So the woman is singing right now, and she says, I slept, but my heart was awake. That's a way of saying that she's dreaming. I slept, but my heart was awake. And then she says, a sound. My beloved is knocking. So she's dreaming that she's laying in bed, and she hears a knock at the door. Open to me, my sister, he says. My love, my dove, my perfect one. He's in a good mood. For my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night. Now the woman says, I had put off my garment. How could I put it on? I had bathed my feet. How could I soil them? My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh on the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not. I called him, but he gave no answer. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. They beat me. They bruised me. They took away my veil, those watchmen of the walls. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I'm sick with love. We're going to stop right there, and we're going to draw out our first point. What's going on here, minus the watchman bit, which we'll get to in a, in a, in a, minus the, the, the late night assault, the first few verses, this is essentially an ancient Near Eastern version of a scene that has played out in virtually every bedroom of every marriage that has ever existed across all time. It is late. Solomon is feeling amorous, and Solomon is indicating to his wife that he's interested in physical intimacy, and he's dropping some serious hints and wanting to know if she would be interested as well. And of course, the, the, the, the woman responds, and her response is the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of, ah, I've, it's late. I've already taken a shower. I'm in my pajamas. I, I've already gotten ready for bed. My retainer is in. I, I, I have a headache. My allergies are kicking up. I have an early meeting tomorrow. The kids are still awake. The dog is staring at us.

So some version of essentially not tonight hunting. And, ah, and so Solomon persists, right? I mean, not in a forceful way, but he just kind of persists, hoping that she'll change her mind. And lo and behold, she starts to get in the mood. And then when she turns to, to embrace Solomon, she realizes that Solomon is gone. And she looks all around. He's nowhere. So she goes out, just like her previous dream earlier in the book. She goes out, looks for him everywhere. But this time the police don't help.

The policemen actually attack her. And then she wakes up and she cries out to the daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my love, tell him I'm sick with love. All right, so what's going on here?

Well, this is a dream sequence, and, and it's an anxiety dream. It's a dream that shows us all of the turmoil in her heart, all of the anxiety she feels, all of the, the, the kind of ambivalence that she feels. And, and if we had time, we could speculate about all of the fears and all of the insecurities that, that are represented in this dream, right? You know, for instance, the watchman beating her bit, what is that about? Is that her own guilt being projected onto those watchmen? Who knows? We don't really have time to get into that because there's a much more relevant immediate point for us to focus on. And that is this, that even in the most ideal marriage, even in this vision of a, of an ideal marriage, divinely inspired, you still have misconceptions, right? Misunderstandings, disappointment, alienation, right? Even in the best marriage, that is still a reality. And that's an incredibly important thing to realize. It's so good that this is in here because it leads us to our first point, which is this. If we want to build intimacy and have healthy, intimate relationships, we must know how to manage our expectations. You have to be able to manage your expectations. Now, I want to apply this in a, in a few different ways. First of all, for those of you who are married, for those of us who are married, we must learn how to manage our expectations of the marriage and of our spouse. Because listen, we all bring expectations into our marriage. And it's like, it's like having a piece of toilet paper stuck to your shoe. You don't know it's there, you track it into the house, and when you finally realize it, you feel embarrassed and like you've soiled the whole place. And that's what these expectations are like. We bring them right in and we, they come from all kinds of places, right? Laura and I got married 10 years ago, and we thought we were so self-aware. We were, I was trained to be a counselor and a pastor, and surely I have worked through all of this. Laura is a brilliant, emotionally intelligent woman.

We thought, sure, you know, we're progressive. We, we've gotten past all that. And then we started to get frustrated with each other. And it was a mystery as to why. I began to get frustrated at little things. Like, I would get frustrated that there was no clean laundry after a few weeks.

[9 : 07] It made me sound like a Neanderthal, doesn't it? But I would get frustrated and I began to realize it's because I was just assuming that Laura would be the one to do the laundry. We had never talked about it, but I just assumed that she would be doing it. It makes me sound so archaic and patriarchal.

But before you throw stones, you need to understand that that's what happened in my house growing up. My mom just always did the laundry. My dad, to this day, I don't think knows how to turn on a washing machine. And that's just the way it was. And so I just assumed that. It came from my mom.

You know, Laura also made some assumptions. She used to get so frustrated that I wouldn't take the lead in managing our finances. She would get so frustrated that I just didn't seem as engaged or that I would care as much as she would. Well, it also just so happens that her dad was a stockbroker for 30 years. Managed all the family's finances, right? Turns out I'm a pastor.

The best I can do is to tell you the word for money in Koine Greek. And it actually turns out that Laura is much better at that than I am. So now she's the Henson family CFO. She's just way better than I am, right? But these are frustrations that were connected to expectations that we didn't even know we had. They were shaped by our parents and their marriage.

And this happens all the time. So let me ask you, what are your expectations when you think about yourself, when you think about your spouse, when you think about your marriage, right? And if you're not married, this is something that you need to be thinking about now. What are the expectations that I might be tracking in to my marriage, like toilet paper stuck to my foot? Some expectations are necessary. Some are not only realistic, they're necessary. Let me give you a couple examples.

[10 : 48] Marital faithfulness. If you cannot reasonably expect that your spouse is going to be faithful, you should not get married. Honesty. You need to just be able to assume that your spouse is honest.

Not touching one another in anger. These are bedrock expectations that must be there, otherwise don't get married. Now some expectations need to be discussed and worked out. One of the examples I just gave was the example of household chores and dividing work at home. Who's going to do what?

That just needs to be worked out in each marriage, and all marriages are different. Your sexual expectations. What sex is going to be like, how you are going to think about sex, how you're going to communicate your desire for sex, your expectations around the frequency with which you will have sex. People are so eager to know what is the norm, how often should we be having sex, and really there's no norm. There's a pretty wide range, and it really comes down to couples and life stage. The important thing is that you're talking about it, that you're working it out, that you're agreeing together on something, right? That has to be worked out. Parenting your kids.

There's different parenting styles. You just need to work that out. So these are expectations that just need to be discussed. But then there's a whole category of expectations that are completely unrealistic, and you just need to get rid of them altogether if they're in your marriage. Let me give you a few examples. It is unrealistic to expect your spouse to be someone they are not, like your mom or your dad. Well, this is the way my dad used to be toward my mom. This is the way my mom used to be toward my dad. This is the way they... We're not talking about your parents. These are two completely different people. It's unrealistic to expect that. You need to be able to accept your spouse as the person they actually are, right? So another unrealistic expectation that comes along with that, it's unrealistic to expect your spouse to change in the ways that you want them to change. Now, here's a guarantee. They are going to change. You know, an older couple who kind of mentored me in seminary, the wife one morning when we came over for the discipleship group we were in, me and some of the other people who are part of this group, she was kind of laughing and saying, in the time that I've been married to Robert, I've been married to five or six different men. And it took us a minute to get what she was saying that, you know, over the course of a long marriage, decades of marriage, we all change quite a bit. But here's the thing. Your spouse may not change in all the ways you would choose. They're going to change. But if you think you can control how that happens, you've got to let that go. That's not your purview, right? That's above your pay grade. That's... You're trying to play

God, right? It's not your job. Number three, it's unrealistic to expect your spouse to anticipate your needs without you stating them. This is a big one. Mind reading is an unrealistic expectation.

[14 : 00] If you can do it, let me know. I've got a lot of ideas for how we can use that talent. But until we develop that ability, it's an unrealistic expectation. This gets people into a lot of trouble.

He should just know what I need. If she really loved me, she would be able to tell that I'm upset. If he really loved me, he would know that he should come home and do X, Y, or Z, right?

Not communicating what we need, not communicating what we want, expecting that our spouse is really tuned in if they really love us, using it maybe as a test. How much does he care about me?

How much does he... If he really cares about me, he will know. No, he won't. He may. He may get lucky and stumble upon it. But it's an unrealistic thing to expect that that's going to happen all the time.

People can't read minds. So a general rule of thumb in your marriage, I would suggest, you cannot hold your spouse responsible for needs that you have not directly stated. You have to be able to assert yourself and ask for what you want and need. Otherwise, it doesn't count.

[15 : 12] Number four, it's unrealistic. This is a big one. It's unrealistic to expect your spouse to meet all of your needs for intimacy. Listen, for most of human history, marriages existed as a small part of a whole village.

And so your need for intimacy and connection and stimulation and support and all those needs were diffused across a vast multi-generational network of relationships. Everybody living together, working together, multiple generations of your family sharing the same living space, all working together in an agrarian society. And so you're raising kids and doing all... This is all pre-industrial revolution. The idea that came along with the industrial revolution, that a family is isolated and that the husband goes off to work and the wife stays home by herself, raising kids largely alone. That is an anomaly in human history. But what it results in is enormous, heartbreaking isolation and depression.

And so we take in our atomized, individualized society, all of our needs for all the different relational social needs that we have, and we keep all of that onto one relationship, our marriage.

No marriage can sustain that. It will crush your marriage. It will crush your spouse. Marriages cannot exist in isolation. It's unrealistic to expect that one relationship can meet all of those needs. We need community. You need a church community. You need a network of relationships.

You need friends outside of your marriage. You need couples that you're friends with, single people that you're friends with, people, your gender, people, the other gender. You need a network of relationships. It's going to be great for your marriage. It's unrealistic to expect that of one person, one relationship. Last and most importantly, and then we got to move on, it's unrealistic to think that the purpose of your marriage is your personal happiness.

[17 : 13] It's unrealistic to think that your marriage is about your personal happiness. Your marriage is not about your happiness. That's not the purpose of marriage. The purpose of marriage is not your happiness. It's your holiness. That's a game changer, frame shift, paradigm shift, Copernican revolution when you begin to realize that. Marriage is not about finding your soulmate.

That is a Greek pagan myth. Marriage is about two very flawed people who both desperately need Jesus coming together to grow in their faith, to mature in their relationship with Christ, to share life and share the road until Jesus comes again. That's what marriage is.

And so every disappointment you run into, every challenge you face, every missed connection or misunderstanding or every time your spouse falls short or you fall short, I encourage you not to see that through the lens of your personal happiness. That'll destroy you, destroy your marriage. Rather, see it through the lens of your personal holiness. How is this a part of what God is doing in my life through this person and through this primary relationship? That's the lens that we need to see our marriages through. So build your marriage on those expectations that need to be there. Negotiate those expectations that need to be worked out and let go of unrealistic expectations. If you insist on holding on to unrealistic expectations, you're holding your spouse hostage.

You're holding them to something they'll never be able to live up to. So that's marriages. A lot of this also applies to people who are dating. So we're not going to get into as much detail, but most people ideally who are dating, they're moving toward marriage. And so this is for you as well. If you're single and you want to be married, these are things that you need to keep in mind as you're thinking about who it is you want to marry. You have expectations about that.

If anybody's read Aziz Ansari's Modern Romance, it's an amazing book. And I know he's been in the news for doing some bad things, and I don't want to get into that. But his book is great and really worth a read. He talks about watching his friend Derek on OKCupid, the dating app. And he says his friend Derek gets on this app, and he lets his friends watch as he kind of goes through his app.

[19 : 50] And OKCupid pairs him up with this, you know, the first woman that pops up on the screen. You know, Aziz says the first woman he clicks on is beautiful. She has a witty profile page. She has a good job. They have lots of shared interests, and including they both love sports. And he says that his friend Derek, after about a minute of looking, just deletes her and moves on. And Aziz says, dude, Derek, what's the problem? What are you doing? She looked amazing. And he's like, ah, she liked the Red Sox. She liked the Red Sox. And then what he says is, you know, my friend Derek 10 years ago would never, if a woman like that walked into his life, he wouldn't even know what to say. He would just, you know, he would just, but on a dating app, when all you have to do is click that X or swipe, it's so easy. So we need to manage our expectations when it comes to dating. And this can apply to men and women. You know, something worth considering, are you open to being with a person who actually exists? Or are you already married to your own expectations? Right? Are you open to a real flesh and blood person who may have pores and acne and cellulite and snore? Or are you in love with an idealized vision that doesn't walk the earth?

You know, that's a really challenging, and that can actually happen in marriage. We can have escape fantasies when our spouse lets us down by imagining the ideal person that we wish we could be with.

I, one time early on, you know, Laura and I broke up, and in this extended breakup period, I was meeting with a psychologist, and he said, well, let's make an ideal, let's make a list of all your ideal attributes, Tommy. Let's just list, who's the ideal woman for you? And let's make a list.

And, you know, we listed all the characteristics, all the characteristics, and he's just, he's like, you know, good news. I actually know a person exactly like this. And I said, really? Who? And he said, it's you, you idiot. He's like, you just made a list of yourself. So then we spent months talking about my narcissism, and we were able to move me to a better place. So we need to manage our expectations, right? This is also true in the church. Last thing I'll say, and then we got to move on. It's also true in the church. Many Christians have this idealized vision of Christian community. We love the idea of Christian community. But when you actually get into a Christian community, you realize that people are real people. They're flesh and blood. And churches are very imperfect, perfect. And they make lots of mistakes. And they don't do things that we think they should do.

And the leaders do things that are incredibly frustrating. And then people are hard to love. And relationships are messy. And you're expecting all of these things. And some of those things get met, and some of them don't. And unless we're able to manage our expectations regarding churches, we'll never find a church home. You'll just bounce around from place to place, looking for that perfect church that doesn't exist. A lot of people do that in D.C. And you know what else a lot of people do? If you live in D.C. long enough, you will encounter people who advocate a vision of Christian community that exists completely apart from the church. It's a vision that says it's a more authentic way to do community for us to have spiritual friendships and to meet together in coffee shops and have prayer nights in our living rooms. And we don't need the church.

[23 : 23] We can do this better on our own, you know? And so the question becomes, well, if we can do that, then who needs the church at all? Why mess around with it? I'll tell you who needs the church.

People without friends. The socially awkward. The poor. The marginalized. People without friends. The socially awkward. The socially awkward. The socially awkward.

Because here's the beautiful thing about the church. The church is like a family. In the sense that by definition, it is not a community that we can curate. You don't get to choose who sits next to you in the pews. But here's the thing. You are called to love them all anyway.

That's something that we all need. But in order to be able to do that, you have to be able to manage your expectations. Right? So these are ways that we need to learn to manage our expectations. If we want to build intimacy, we have to be able to manage them. And one of the best things that we can do is to not focus on our expectations at all, but rather shift our focus instead to the practice of affirmation. Affirming the people we love. And so the rest of this passage contains two extended sections of affirmation between the husband and the wife. And we're not going to go through it verse by verse, but I just want to show you this. Let's move on. The chorus asks, what is your beloved more than another beloved? Why is he so special? And here's what she says.

My beloved is radiant and ruddy. His head is the finest gold. His eyes are like doves beside streams of water. We'll keep going. His cheeks are like beds of spices. His arms are rods of gold set within jewels. We'll keep going. His legs are alabaster columns. His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, oh daughters of Jerusalem.

[25 : 31] How common it is, I think, for us to get together, women and men, and when we get together, we criticize our spouses. We focus on all the ways they're letting us down. We, you know, it's in the context of Christian sharing and transparency, but really it's just a, you know, a gripe session. And we complain about all the ways we're disappointed. Can you imagine, can you imagine if somebody started to kind of get real? And can you, can you imagine if these women are sitting here, they're having coffee, and that, that kind of conversation is starting, and then, can you imagine one of the women at the table sounding forth about her husband like this and saying, this is my beloved, and this is my friend, oh daughters of Jerusalem. Can you imagine that?

Can you imagine if husbands did that? Can you imagine if we even talked about our marriages when we got together? Much less in such affirming ways. That would be a radical culture shift if that happened. That would be amazing. So they're affirming each other, not just to one another, but to other people. We keep going. They say, where is your beloved gone, oh most beautiful among women? Well, where do you think he's gone? My beloved's right here. My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to graze in the gardens, and to gather lilies. It's a metaphor for sexual intimacy. She's saying, we've resolved our problems, that misfire from the other night, that weird dream I had, we're past it, we're intimate again, things are great in the home, all as well. So we keep going. Now he says to her, you are beautiful as Terza, my love. Awesome as an army with banners. Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me. That's so romantic. Keep going.

We'll skip the hairs like a flock of goats. I just don't think that works at all in our culture. Your teeth are like a flock of ewes. That doesn't really work either. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate. Go either way with that. There are 60 queens and 80 concubines.

Don't ever bring up other women when you're complimenting your wife. Don't ever do that. Maybe it worked here. It doesn't work now. We'll keep going. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed. Queens and concubines also, they praised her. Who is this who looks down like the dawn?

Beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners. I think that's one of the most amazing things. Because there's a sense when he looks at her that there's not just a sexual attraction and a desire, but a kind of awe. He's looking at his wife with awe. It makes him tremble.

[28 : 06] He's terrified in the ancient use of the word. You know, terror meaning to tremble. He trembles when he beholds his beloved. It's like beholding an army with banners. It's an amazing thing to say.

Right? So this extended time of mutual affirmation makes the second point pretty clear. If you want to build intimacy in your relationships, you need to affirm the one that you love. Affirm them and affirm them to other people. And when I say affirmation, I don't just mean empty praise.

You're so great. Look at how you did that. Dinner's so good. Not that kind of stuff. I'm talking about speaking deep words of truth that build your beloved up, that build your friend up, that build your spouse up. Speaking to build them up, to validate them, to validate their feelings, to validate their experience, to ground them in what is good and true and beautiful about them as a person.

It's words that affirm and speak to their very identity. And this is like sunlight to a flower. Verbal affirmation is crucial in relationships. You know, I brought up earlier in the series a guy named John Gottman. He is a marriage counselor who's done an enormous amount of research on healthy marriages. And he tries to figure out what are the characteristics of people who end up getting divorced and people who thrive, what he calls marriage masters. And he says here, one of the biggest differences is the ratio of affirmation to criticism. Affirmation to criticism. He says couples who end up getting divorced, who are on the rocks, who don't make it, that their ratio between those is about a one-to-one ratio. So for every positive affirming thing that is said, there's also some kind of critical remark or there's defensiveness or there's alienation or there's contempt or, you know, and it's about a one-to-one ratio. He says those couples don't last.

But the thriving couples, the thriving couples, the minimum ratio is vastly different. He says the minimum ratio of affirming to criticism is at least five to one. Ideally, it's closer to ten to one, but at least five to one. So for every one critical comment, for every one defensive, snarky, sarcastic comment, there are five truly affirming, encouraging, validating remarks.

[30 : 29] And they say that they maintain that ratio even when they're arguing, even when they're fighting. They don't get nasty with each other. Even in the midst of arguments, they joke, they affirm each other, they validate each other. There's a general sense in which that ratio is maintained.

And what's interesting is that this is true in all different kinds of relationships. The Harvard Business Review published a completely unrelated study about workplace performance and team leaders and bosses, what is the ideal ratio between affirmation and constructive criticism? And guess what they found? Five to one. It's really interesting. Nothing to do with Gottman, yet the exact same thing was found. So expectation and affirmation, two keys to intimate relationships. And I want you to see how these fit together as we kind of bring this all to a close. If you focus on your unmet expectations, on your unrealistic expectations, if that's your focus, then you will only tend to see deficiencies, you will only tend to see shortcomings and failures, and you will tend to be more critical.

And that will ultimately undermine the health of your relationship. It will bring that ratio down. But if you shift your attention and focus on affirmation, that's going to actually help you to see the positives, to see the victories, to see the growth, to see the unexpected blessings that various people bring into your life, ways that God maybe was wiser than you thought in giving you this person.

And then you will tend to be more encouraging, more affirming, and more willing to build people up with your words. And that's going to shift that ratio in a good direction. So these are things that we need to be thinking about. There's one last thing I want to say before we, before we move on in our service, and that is this. I want us to consider the role of expectation in our relationship with God.

The role of expectation in our relationship with God. Of course, when it comes to our expectations of God, we need to realize that our relationship with God is like a marriage. That there are times of incredible intimacy. There are times of incredible closeness. There are times when you feel God's presence. And then there are also times when God doesn't make sense, when He feels distant, when we feel full of doubt, not even sure if He's there. And that realistic expectations of our spiritual life must include those times. Times of closeness and times of alienation, just like any marriage.

[33 : 13] But the real question, and this is what I want you to think about as we go on with our week. This comes from a guy named David Benner. Here's the real question. Imagine God is thinking about you.

What do you imagine God feels when you come into His mind? What does God feel when you come into His mind? You know what Benner says? Most people think that God feels disappointed. Most people that He talks to would say disappointment. God has these expectations. He's done all of this for me. And He has all this great vision for my life. And He has all these expectations of the kind of person I'm going to be now that I know Jesus. And I think most of the time when God looks at what I'm actually doing and how I'm actually living, that God feels profoundly disappointed, frustrated, and that He's just kind of tolerating me.

That's a pagan idea. That's a pagan idea. That's not the gospel. That's not Christianity. We're anthropomorphizing God when we think that His love is in any way, shape, or form like our love. As though when we get frustrated or disappointed or people do what we want, that our love is sort of like a flickering flame that can come and go, that it can rise and fall, that it kind of gets blown around with the wind. That's a pagan idea. That's imagining God is like us. But when we talk about the love of God, we're not talking about some fickle emotion driven by neurotransmitters and hormones. We're talking about the very character of God. His love is an extension of His character.

When the Bible says God loves you, that is a constant like gravity that never changes.

That the heavens and the earth will pass away, but the force of that love remains. That's what the word steadfast love means. It's a universal constant. And so no matter what we do, no matter how much we screw up or sin, that love never changes, it's never even remotely threatened or touched. Do you know what God feels when you come into His mind? He doesn't feel disappointment. He feels delight. Sheer, uncompromising delight. God delights in you. That's why God sent Jesus, the proof of His love, to be the embodiment, the personification of His love, as proof. You know, this idea that our sin, God got so angry at our sin that He sent Jesus to the cross because He was angry and He needed to be appeased. That's a pagan idea. That is not the gospel. Do you know why Jesus went to the cross? It's because we, for all of our existence, have given our hearts to other lovers, idols. We've given our hearts to our need for, for, for, you know, encouragement. We've given to our hearts to our need for success. We've given our hearts to our need for safety or control. We've given our hearts to all of these other things.

[36 : 31] All of these lovers who have betrayed us and hurt us again and again and ultimately enslaved us. And so God sent Jesus to the cross to set us free from those idols. The reason we sin is because we are all idolaters. We're adulterous. God sent Jesus as proof to liberate us, to set us free from sin, ultimately to turn us from our idols, to prove to us that no one in existence loves us more than He does.

And so the great invitation of the gospel is not to trudge along, doing our best, promising it'll be better tomorrow, hoping that God continues to put up with us. That's paganism. There's no life there.

The invitation of the gospel is to surrender yourself more fully to that awesome, terrible love, love, to expose the most shameful, unsightly parts of yourself, and to risk that God might respond not with rejection, but with embrace. And the more we surrender ourselves to that love, the more we experience it fully, and the more intimacy we have with our Maker. Let's pray.