

Believe

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Preacher: Ray Sweet

[0 : 00] Hey, thank you so much for tuning in today. My name is Ray Sweet from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. As always, you can check us out at FCCGreensburg.com or you can go to the FCC Greensburg Facebook page.

But thank you for joining us. We're excited to get into the Word today. And I want to welcome you back to the third week of our series called DNA. We're looking at our unique spiritual DNA here at FCC.

So far, we've talked about our vision that says Jesus first. And it's really as simple as Jesus' words in Matthew 6.33. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

See, that is our why. Jesus first in everything. Last week, we talked about the first part of our mission statement, looking at how we accomplish that.

Starting with belong. We were created for community. First with Jesus, who has been pursuing us all this time. And then with a community of Bible-believing, authentic, notice I didn't say perfect, authentic followers of Christ.

[1 : 16] Where we can find that support system of encouragement and accountability that you and I both need in our lives. Now, today's going to look a little different than a typical message as we talk about our mission to help people believe in Jesus.

We have three short testimonies that I want you to listen to and connect with. First will be my beautiful wife of over 17 years, Bethany, as she shares how she came to believe in Jesus.

I was born on a Sunday and was in church by the following Sunday. My mom has often told me that she was actually upset that she had to miss church that day.

At the time, my family actually attended here at First Christian Church. And the first person to visit me at the hospital just a few hours after I was born was the associate pastor, Glenn Jewell.

In many ways, I felt like I had always walked with Jesus. Being a part of a church family has always been a part of my life.

[2 : 26] If the doors of the church were open, we were usually there. I can probably count on one hand how many times I missed church as a kid. We were faithful in attending and serving within our church family.

I participated in Sunday school, VBS, Wednesday Warriors, youth group, the praise team, countless other activities, and spent every summer at Mahoney Valley Christian Service Camp, which became my home away from home and where I worked for 10 years while in high school, college, and even two years after Ray and I were married.

For a long time, I really believed that because being a part of the church was all I ever really knew, that somehow I didn't really have a testimony, that my story wasn't special or anything powerful or even worth sharing.

I didn't have this exciting 180-degree transformation of a life far from God, and I was always in awe of those who did have that kind of story to share of God's divine intervention in their lives.

When I was in the sixth grade, I had a Sunday school teacher who pulled me aside and basically told me that it was time to get baptized. Many other kids in that age group were all making the decision to get baptized themselves, but I just didn't agree that this was how it was supposed to happen.

[3 : 54] Even though I had known of Jesus literally my whole life, I was waiting for that moment when I knew Jesus was personally inviting me.

I knew his timing would be perfect, and it couldn't be forced. When I was 14 years old, I was at church camp as I always was for the summer and was having an amazing time.

All week, Jesus was really becoming even more personal to me than he ever had been before. It was a Thursday evening, and we were ending the night in our campfire groups after campfire, in our family groups after campfire, and we were about to pray together, and I remember that I just broke down.

And in that moment, truly surrendered everything to Jesus. My family group gathered around me and prayed over me, and it was unlike anything else that I had ever experienced.

To physically hear people praying out loud on my behalf was such a blessing. I knew that Jesus had always loved me, but that week, I understood more deeply the significance of my sin and that my sin separated me from a perfect and holy God.

[5 : 18] I understood that all my years of growing up in the church and relying on the faith of my parents was not the same as having a personal and intimate relationship of my own with the Savior of the world who created me, loved me more than I could ever possibly imagine, and died for the ugliness of my sin.

Two weeks later, I was baptized at my home church by my dad, which was super special to me because I am a daddy's girl. The timing of my salvation prepared me for the hardships that were waiting, and the Lord knew that.

Around that same time, my family was walking through our own difficulties. And as a young believer, I somehow had this wrong thinking that since I had surrendered my heart to Jesus, that all the troubles would just go away.

And when they didn't, I just didn't really understand why. Getting baptized in order to fix our problems was definitely not my motivation for surrendering my life to the Lord.

But I somehow thought that it was a given byproduct of my decision to follow Jesus. As I grew in my faith, I learned that while the difficulties were still present in my life, I now knew who to cling to and who to put my trust and hope in.

[6 : 46] After graduating high school, I continued following Jesus and went to Bible College in Tennessee to earn a degree in teacher education. And when you go to Bible College, it's kind of a joke that girls go there to get their MRS degree and ring before spring or your money back.

But I had actually told my dad that I really could see myself marrying someone who was in full-time ministry and that I felt like God had prepared me for that kind of role.

My senior year of college, I came home for Christmas break and I met Ray. We were married 11 months later. And despite what some of his sermons may lead you to believe, I was not as desperate as he made it seem.

We now have been in full-time ministry together going on 18 years. You know, my story may not be full of suspense or this extreme radical transformation, but it's mine.

And it's been meant to be used to tell of his glory. God has used it to benefit our time in ministry.

And I really feel like with the difference in mine and Ray's background that we've both been able to relate and connect with a variety of people.

[8 : 06] I'm so grateful that the Lord saw fit to give me a life that had the privilege of growing up in church. But growing up in church is not the same thing as having an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus.

I still had to make the choice for myself to deny myself and take up his cross and follow him. And it's a choice I make every single day.

So if you find yourself like me, having grown up in the church your whole life and not knowing anything different, you do have a story to share.

And it is valuable because God wants to use it to reveal himself to others. I love her story, but I got to tell you, mine looks a little different.

A few similarities though, also reared in a hardworking blue collar family in this community. I had a good childhood. Raised in the country on the north end of the county, we didn't get everything we wanted.

[9 : 15] And yeah, as a kid, there were times where I was kind of envious of the toys other kids got. But listen, I was loved and raised in a caring family that I appreciate more and more as the days go by.

Two amazing parents who still love me and my family better than we deserve. And we were for sure taught the value of hard work and determination. Now, unlike Bethany, I didn't grow up in a church-going family.

And I had to figure out what I believed as I went. And it wasn't long before my shy and timid personality was easily led down some destructive paths. Never the extreme example, but I did get into the habit of partying it up on the weekends. Too much alcohol, smoking pot, and even thinking that those things, along with relationships with girls, would somehow fill that void, that God-shaped hole in my heart. And I'll tell you, it didn't work. And I always knew, even before knowing Jesus, that God had a greater call on my life. And that crowd that I hung around with, man, that wasn't where I truly belonged.

[10:26] And there was always a reverence that I had towards the things of God. I just didn't fully understand any of it. But I remember once in high school, when I was hanging out with a group of guys doing things I shouldn't have been doing, they were rolling some joints.

And they ran out of papers. So one of them says, hey, we got a Bible in the house. Those papers are perfect for rolling these. Let's use that. And I remember, I mean, this is someone who didn't know Jesus at all, never opened the Bible.

I remember saying, no way, man. I am not smoking God's Word. I'm out. And then as I graduated from North Decatur, I went to what was called IUPU Columbus at the time.

And it was during that freshman year that my eyes were opened. Within three weeks of being in school, 9-11 happened and the world was different. Our eyes were opened.

And we all began to think about life just a little deeper. In that process, I was invited to a Campus Crusades for Christ Bible study. That's where I began to hear about Jesus really for the very first time.

[11:37] I began to look at Scripture, just learning some of those very basics. And then one day, the preacher who taught the class came in and he said he couldn't lead it anymore.

But a lady from the church was going to lead it. So context a little bit. I'm 18 years old. This lady who's probably seemed old to me at the time, she was probably 35 or 40, younger than I am now. And she began leading this study. And I don't remember exactly what was taught, but I do remember that, man, this lady truly was shining for Jesus.

Her life had been changed and there was something uniquely different about her that truly I wanted in my life too. I haven't told a lot of people this until now, but I was battling depression at the time. And in her and in the other students, I saw hope in those faces who were sincere and authentic. And I began to read the New Testament for myself.

[12:38] I began to wrestle with the Lord. I began to contemplate whether I was really going to jump all in. I knew I couldn't be one foot in and one foot out. And that was hard because I had my vices.

I knew I cussed like a sailor, no offense to those in the Navy. I knew that I liked to party it up. I knew that there were a lot of things in my life that God was going to change.

And for a couple months, we had this tug of war because I was scared. But finally, one day as I was on a walk that ended up in a cemetery, odd, I know, but I gave up finally.

And I cried out, Jesus, you have been showing me in so many ways that you're real. I've believed that there's a God all my life, but I've never known you. I'm ready to have that relationship.

If you'll have me, come into my life and take all of me. Lord, I am sorry for my sin. Forgive me and give me that same hope that I see in the Christians that you brought into my life.

[13:42] And man, I am so grateful that he took this kid who wasn't the worst in the crowd by any means, but who was still lost, desperately in need of Jesus.

Probably a better description of me was that I was the one who was often forgotten in the crowd. And he took my heart and he began that daily process of transforming me into the image of Christ. And I still just stand in awe of his awesome power that he could use me, a broken vessel like me, to stand up and preach God's word every week that truly sets us free.

See, God is so good. And I want to introduce you to one more quick testimony this morning from a member of our church family that I deeply respect.

His name is Donald. Good morning, church. My name is Donald. And I'd like to take a few minutes to share with you a little bit about my story.

[14:44] I want to tell you about how Jesus saved my life and transformed it. When I was young, you know, I was your average kid. I attended Sunday school and loved hunting, fishing, and I loved to play ball and any kind of ball, riding dirt bikes, you know, things kids love to do, you know, which I

still do today.

But the thing I treasured the most when I was young was my family. You know, when I was a senior in high school, some detrimental events happened in my life.

You know, I'd lost my father, which caused me to turn to drugs and alcohol. You know, it was the only way, you know, I knew how to kind of forget about what had happened and just to kind of numb the pain.

So basically, I was trying to figure life out on my own. I was trying to do things my way. And in turn, it led to many jail and prison sentences only to get out and repeat them all over again because I didn't know any better.

You know, I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to stop the madness in my life. And, you know, the whole time, I was ignoring God's true calling in my life. And it wasn't until I was in a jail cell in 2021 that I got tired of living the way I was living.

[16:05] I couldn't handle it anymore. And this was when I finally cried out to God to help me. You know, I finally surrendered my life to Christ. And in Proverbs 3.11, it says, My child, don't reject the Lord's discipline and do not be upset when He corrects you.

For the Lord corrects the ones that He loves just as a father corrects a child in whom He delights. So this was very true in my life. So in 2021, when I finally surrendered to God's will and made the most important decision in my life, that's when I chose who I belonged to and I chose the Lord.

And I was always that guy that whenever I was doing something, I was going to do it 100%. So I got baptized in 2021. And my life started changing.

My relationship with God grew stronger and stronger. Still not knowing what my true calling was, just trusting in the Lord and walking in blind faith with Him day by day.

Trusting in the plan that He had for me. So I was always wondering how I was even still alive from all the things that had happened in my life.

[17:21] The things that I had done. Things that I couldn't understand. And I talked to God just like I'm talking to you right now. And I asked God, why did you save me so many times?

Why? And He clearly answered me and He said, because I love you. And because I'm not done with you. And John 8.36 says, He who the Son sets free is free indeed.

And this is exactly what happened in my life. The Lord will never walk you to something He can't walk you through. And that's exactly what happened. And so what that means to me is that He'd been conditioned me all my life to do His will.

So today, I help other men in their lives so they don't make the same mistakes that I made. Today, Philip and I are the co-directors at the Ark of Decatur. We're a faith-based, sober living home where God is fully in charge.

In Matthew 18.12, it talks about the 99 sheep and the one that got lost. And He left the other 99 to go save the one. And you see, I am the one.

[18:38] He always has been there in my life. But when I chose Him, He had already chosen me. Just as Philip and I tell all the men at the Ark, my goal is to make it to Heaven and make sure that anyone that I interact with knows the Lord and knows what He means to me.

and knows what He has done for me. Not only do I talk about the Lord, but I truly hope that others can see the Lord through me. And I want to be an example to everyone so that people can understand God's love and grace.

And if you knew me before, then you absolutely know what He's done in my life. I'm here to teach others and to show others a true living, walking, and talking miracle.

You know, God loves me and He loves you too. Thank you. Well, today you got to hear three testimonies of real people coming to Christ that had some similarities, but you know what?

There were also some differences in our stories. And each of our stories were equally important.

Each of us is equally valuable in God's eyes. And my prayer is that you are able to connect with at least one of us and see that we've all sinned and need Jesus.

[19:57] That every testimony matters and needs to be told because we connect with different people. And our God, man, He specializes in putting the exact people in our path who need to hear our story.

But for the rest of our time, I want us to chat about what the Bible teaches it looks like to believe in Jesus. Because Luke 19.10 tells us, For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

You know, when the stuffy religious people questioned Jesus, when people around Him tried to make it all about rules, good deeds, and popularity, Jesus saw the prostitute, the tax collector, the blind, the leper, the forgotten, the hurting, the drain on society.

And He said, I love Him. I love her. She is a masterpiece. Watch what I can do when I have their whole heart. So today, we're going to get a little kind of old-fashioned Christian church on you as it comes down to the plan of salvation.

We're going to talk about hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized. So let's start here with the very first one, the first thing that has to happen, and that's hear the good news.

[21 : 19] And I know this is pretty self-explanatory, but you can't believe until you've truly heard the gospel message. And I love how in Romans chapter 10, starting here in verse 14, it puts it this way.

It says, How then can they call on the one that they've not believed in? And how can they believe in the one whom they've not heard?

And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? Now, that simple but beautiful story of a God who loved His creation so much that He saw us in our sin.

Being a God of perfect justice, He made a way for us to be forgiven, to be restored. He sent His Son into this world, born of a virgin, from humble origins, among stinky animals, laid in a manger, and worshipped by the shepherds, and eventually by the wise men.

He grew into a man living a perfect, sinless life. He healed the sick, preaching the kingdom of God. And because He threatened their religious hierarchy, He was mistreated, lied about, arrested, mocked, spit upon, beaten, and forced to carry His cross to Golgotha.

[22 : 47] There, the sinless Son of God suffered, taking our sins upon His shoulders, giving His innocent life in exchange for our guilty ones.

And then things got quiet for the rest of Friday, all day Saturday, and into Sunday morning. And when the disciples were reeling, when Satan was celebrating, and when the Pharisees were puffing out their chests, Jesus rose from the grave.

He came busting out of the tomb to conquer death and offer all who would pick up their cross daily and follow Him all eternity. That's the story that changed everything for Donald, for Bethany, and myself.

And listen, this is the gospel truth that we will proclaim because it sets us free. And you've heard that wonderful message.

And then second, believe in Jesus. I want to read to you a very familiar passage, one that I know that you probably can quote at least the first part of it, but we're going to keep going with the next two verses because a lot of false understandings of this passage are because we didn't keep reading, because we didn't study the context.

[24 : 06] So if we look here at John 3.16, verse 17, it says this, for God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Verse 17, for God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through Him. So God's passion is for the lost. And then in verse 18, it says this, whoever believes in Him is not condemned but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

So two big things here. First, this passage and many others make it clear that there's only two places we can go when we take our last breath or if Jesus comes back first.

Heaven or hell. A perfect place reserved for those made innocent only by the blood of Jesus Christ where we will spend eternity in His presence.

And then sadly, hell. A place reserved for the devil, His angels, and those who reject Jesus as Lord and Savior. A place of torment for all eternity separated from God.

[25 : 27] And it all depends on what we do with Jesus on this earth. While there's still breath in our lungs, we must make Jesus the Lord of our life. And then second, that word believe has often been manipulated to mean whatever we want it to mean.

Fine, Grandma, I believe. Now get off my back, right? Well listen, Satan believes like that, right? That God exists too and he trembles for the day of his demise.

So that's not true belief. True belief carries action. And when you say, I believe, it means you believe that every word of scripture is true. It means that you believe that Jesus is God.

It means that you're all in ready to be transformed into his image. Living for him. And that leads us to the third thing.

And that's repent of your sins. You know, when I sit down and I meet with those who want to talk about giving their lives to Christ, we dwell on this one for a while because repentance is a churchy word.

[26 : 40] I doubt when you are yelling at your kids, you're saying, repent from hitting your brother, right? See, this word in the original Greek is a military word that means what we would call about face.

So it means to turn 180 degrees in the opposite direction. So when God's word says we must repent, it means that we must hear that gospel and believe that Jesus is who he says he is. But it's more than just tears flowing down my cheeks. It's more than just an emotional response because the preacher did a good job. It means to actually turn in the opposite direction away from my sins, surrendering everything to following Christ.

And if I can share the heart of most pastors I know, we see a lot of people hear the gospel and are moved by it. We see a lot of tears shed.

We see people come and repeat words after us. But that's often where a lot of it stops. And there's no salvation in Christ without true repentance.

[27 : 49] So don't take my word for it but let me show you what the scripture teaches us here in Acts 3 starting in verse 19 and then 20.

It says, Repent then and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out that times of refreshing may come from the Lord and that he may send the Messiah who is appointed for you even Jesus. Or you can even put it like this, especially that's who the Messiah is, Jesus. So yes, there must be grieving over our sin, a turning away from that old lifestyle to truly follow Jesus.

And then fourth, confess Jesus as Lord. I can't tell you how many times I've had someone come up to me and say that they want to come forward and give their life to Christ or even come as a Christian to place their membership.

But, they say, I don't feel comfortable coming up in front of everyone in the church. And while I realize it can be a scary thing to come up in front of other people, I get it.

[28 : 59] But I always encourage them, you're going to be okay. And the reason I don't back down on this isn't because I'm trying to be stubborn. Instead, I'm convinced that our faith is not meant to be this secret thing that we hide.

But instead, it's an unashamed journey with Jesus where we live it out loud no matter what comes. And one passage that has convinced this to me is from 1 Timothy 6, starting here in verse 12.

1 Timothy 6, starting here in verse 12, says this. It says, Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

See, when you come to Jesus and you make that public proclamation, you're saying, Jesus is my Lord. I'll live for Him no matter what comes.

And that is something we can't be ashamed of. And then last, be baptized into Christ. And what a joy it's been here at this church to see well over 100 people in just the last three years get baptized into Christ.

[30 : 14] And while I'd be the first one to acknowledge that there are wonderful Bible-believing Christians who may see baptism a little differently than we do, please, here's what I encourage you to do.

I think this will change your mind. Please do a study on every salvation experience in the New Testament. Every time baptism is mentioned, and I think you'll see why we feel here at FCC the way we do, that it's more than just an outward sign of an inward faith, that it's an important part of surrendering your life to Jesus Christ.

See, in Acts 2, verse 38, we have Pentecost. And this is where the Holy Spirit has come upon believers in a powerful way. The disciples are preaching the gospel.

Some of them are speaking in languages. They call that speaking in tongues, languages they don't even know through the power of the Holy Spirit. And as Peter finishes preaching, it says that so many were cut to the heart.

And they ask, what shall we do? I mean, they just heard the Word of God preached in all their different languages. That's what they were doing, speaking in tongues. And it says, Peter replied, repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[31 : 40] Now, going down in the water, dying to sin, and then rising to new life in Christ, that's what it's all about. What a beautiful picture of God's grace.

And a couple convictions we hold based on Scripture is that first, baptism was always by immersion in the New Testament. And the reason we don't sprinkle is because that very word in the Bible, in the original language, baptizo, that means to plunge under.

It means to immerse. This would have made sense in the first century when they would have dyed clothes. Let's say that you had a bucket of water, you've got purple dye in it, and then you would plunge those white garments all the way under so that you could make sure that white garment now has turned into a fully purple piece of clothing.

So I get it. Some were raised in church traditions that sprinkled. And listen, I'm not here to cast your relatives and everyone you knew who came from that church tradition to hell.

God is the perfect judge. I'll leave that to Him. But listen, like you've heard us say in this series, in the first week of it, this church was founded on the idea of going back to the Bible.

[33 : 00] That's our source of authority. More than tradition, more than man-made creeds and doctrines and teachings, we are going to go back to the Bible in everything.

That's our authority. That's why here at our church to place your membership you must be an immersed believer. No one's going to question your heart and your love for Jesus.

We are simply just going to follow His Word. We also don't believe in baptizing babies because they cannot fulfill everything God's Word has shared with us today about the plan of salvation.

They can't hear and process the Gospel. They can't believe. They can't repent of their sins and confess Jesus sincerely as Lord. Every example that you see in the New Testament of someone coming to Christ is someone old enough to make that decision for themselves.

And if you would like just some further clarification on this, please, let's talk about that. Let's look at the Word together and let's talk it through. But I hope today through the testimonies of transformation that you've heard by studying God's Word, I hope you can see that because Jesus came to seek and save the lost, part of our mission is to help put Him first and to help the lost discover hope in Christ.

[34 : 27] I'm going to leave you with this quote by the coolest missionary name I've ever heard. His name was C.T. Studd. And he once said this, some want to live within the sound of a church or chapel bell.

He said, I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell. FCC, let's care about a lost world around us.

Let's love people to Jesus where they can discover life in Him. The same life that we are blessed to walk in today as believers.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we just thank You for Your amazing grace that You have shown. I thank You for the testimonies that we've heard today and just how impactful they are to know that we've all sinned, we've all fallen short and no matter what our story looks like, we all need Jesus and our story is important because God has people who need to hear it.

So help us to have the boldness to proclaim that story and help us just to love people and shine the light of Jesus in everything we do. Father, I pray if there's anyone watching this who does not know Your salvation, that today can be a day of salvation where as they surrender their lives to You.

[35 : 58] So Father, thank You for Your Word today. Thank You for how You are speaking into our hearts and may You be glorified in everything. We pray this in Jesus' precious name and God's people said Amen and Amen.

Hey, real quick, if you have questions about the church, if you would like to talk about giving your life to Christ, maybe you have some faith questions, reach out to us.

We would love to come alongside you. Here's a couple ways we can start that conversation. You can call the church office. Once again, we're First Christian Church, Greensburg, Indiana.

My name is Ray. You can call the church office 812-663-8488 or you can email me at ray at FCCGreensburg.com.

Hey, God bless you and have a great week. Go tell your story.