

GOOD SUNDAYS CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

Back in 1948 three men robbed a bank in Kansas, getting away with \$1000. A few weeks later in a nearby town there was a terrible car accident in which 3 men were killed. The police decided that they were the thieves in the bank robbery so the case was closed. Years later, a man named Al Johnson stepped forward at Seward Avenue Baptist Church in Topeka Kansas and confessed to the crime. Local newspapers carried the story. Al Johnson was only a teenager when he committed the crime. Recently he had come to faith in Jesus Christ and wanted to repent of what he had done. He felt he could not keep his crime a secret and still be faithful as a follower of Christ. In the end, because the statute of limitations on the case had run out, Johnson was not prosecuted for the offense. But because of his complete and total change of heart, he not only confessed his crime, he voluntarily repaid his share of the stolen money! That's repentance – the radical reconstruction of the human heart.

History is full of stories of people like Al Johnson. People who were radically transformed by the amazing grace of God. Today we are concluding our series today I Love Sundays. We have talked about the fact that going to church is important, that we need corporate worship to help us refocus. This happens best in the context of community. We have talked about the importance of rest. God designed us to require one day in 7 to recharge our batteries.

Two weeks ago Patrick reminded us that Sundays are important, not just for us but for our families. Going to church together and doing things together helps strengthen our families. Last week I spoke about the fact that going to church exposes us to the gospel which can change our eternity. Today I want to talk about the fact that good Sundays change the world.

I want to make a bold statement this morning: I believe that the Church of Jesus Christ, God's Sunday people, have done more good for this world than any other group in history. I think I can back that up. I have always been impressed by people of vision who shape the world in a positive way.

People like Charlemagne, who decided that every child in his empire should learn to read, so he created the first public education system. In America people like Patrick Henry helped lead a revolution by declaring that liberty was more precious to him than life itself. Or Abraham Lincoln, who led the United States through the Civil War and help end the tyranny of slavery. Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. was able to envision a day when people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, and the civil rights movement was born.

Vision is the ability to imagine a better future. People of vision give a great gift to others. History is full of such people, but in my humble opinion, the greatest foreseer and shaper of the future was a carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus. No one has given the world a greater gift than Jesus. On one occasion Jesus and His disciples were in Caesarea Philippi. He boldly announced that He would build His Church and that nothing and no one would keep Him from it.

Matthew 16:13-18 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 But what about you? he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Those were incredible words for the days they were spoken. Jesus was speaking to a small group of young men in an obscure nation controlled by the mighty Roman Empire. How could one man with 12 young people establish the greatest transformation movement of all time? Add to that is the fact that in just a few months' time Jesus was going to die a horrible death at the hands of the Romans.

It all sounds impossible. And yet today we see the results of that statement. The Church of Jesus has improved our world more than any other movement or religion on earth.

1. Jesus has Built His Church

As Christians spread to other parts of the world, from Israel to Syria, they started a church in Antioch. Listen to this description from a historian of what Antioch was like before Christianity arrived:

Antioch was a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred. A city where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity. A city filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms. -- Rodney Stark: *The Rise of Christianity*

Now listen to Stark's description of what happened when Sunday people showed up there:

Once Christianity did appear, its superior capacity for meeting these chronic problems soon became evident and played a major role in its ultimate triumph -- Rodney Stark

That type of story has repeated itself year after year in every country and place where Jesus's people dwell. Here's an example: in AD 260 the entire Roman Empire was hit with a plague that killed somewhere between one-third and one-half the people. Stark writes,

Dionysius [a bishop at the time] wrote, "At the first onset of the disease, the pagans pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert that spread and contagion of the fatal disease."

Meanwhile, the followers of Jesus "nursed the sick and dying and even spared nothing in preparing the dead for proper burial." (*The Rise of Christianity*, p. 83)

In AD 362, Emperor Julian lamented that he and his pagan friends needed to imitate the virtues of the Christians;

Their benevolence toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead... The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well." (*The Rise of Christianity*, p. 84)

Julian was bothered that so many people were converting to Christianity because of the loving actions of Christians; he launched a campaign to create pagan charities in an effort to match their efforts. It failed miserably. After all, what would motivate people to risk their own lives for the sake of others? Only Christians have the answer. Ever since Jesus rose from the dead, ever since receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Christians have been turning the world upside-down.

Dr. D. James Kennedy wrote a book 'What if Jesus Had Never Been Born.' In it he said the following;

“It was Christians who invented the modern hospital, the university, gave literacy and education to the masses, created free enterprise, representative government, and civil liberties. It was Christians who abolished slavery in England and the United States, elevated the status of women, and invented the very concepts of charity and benevolence.”

A majority of people groups on earth today had their languages codified by Christians, who created their alphabets, then translated the Bible into their languages. The reason Russia has a “Cyrillic” alphabet is because Saint Cyril created it for them, so they could read the Scriptures. That story has been repeated in languages and to people groups all over the world.

Take an art history or music history class, and you’ll find that many of the best and most famous pieces were painted or composed by Christians. We have been Jesus’s hands and feet in transforming hurting people into helping people, takers into givers, and we’ve seen countless souls saved for eternity. I love Sundays, in part because Sundays infect the people who celebrate them—and those people infect the world with good!

The story of God building His Church is a David versus Goliath story. A man named Jesus, joined by twelve others, was then joined by hundreds, then thousands, then millions, and now billions. And we, God’s Sunday people, have changed and are changing the world with intentional institutions and random acts of kindness every day.

A few minutes ago I said that I have always been impressed by people of Vision, and I gave some examples. Charlemagne, founder of the Holy Roman Empire, was motivated to create public school education because he wanted every person in his realm to be able to read the Bible. Patrick Henry, the one who shouted “Give me liberty or give me death,” the cry that launched the American Revolution, was a Christian and gave that cry while standing in a church in Richmond, Virginia. Abraham Lincoln, the emancipator of slaves, was a committed Christ follower. Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister. I could go on and on...

2. Jesus is Building His Church

History confirms that the Church of Jesus has brought more positive changes on our world than any other entity. It has done so because of the energized efforts of Sunday people. More than any other group, the Church has changed the world. And the church is still changing the world.

I heard a recent story of a church planter named in his hometown of Nairobi, Kenya. When choosing a site for his church, he decided to locate it in one of the worst districts he could find. His church bought land two blocks off a main boulevard that was home to lots of bars and brothels. Within two years of that pastor moving in, most of the bars and brothels were closed, because the people had been won to the Lord and had sought better and more wholesome professions.

This is the story of the Church. Wherever Sunday people go, God goes. Wherever God goes, lives are transformed and hope abounds.

That’s what Jesus had in mind when He spoke those words in Caesarea Philippi “I will build my church.” In his mind, Jesus saw His people reaching out with love and kindness to help others. Before Jesus died He said;

John 14:12 I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

Jesus saw the day when His followers would cover the earth extending His love and power to everyone on the earth. He saw Christians, gathering on Sundays to rest, be refreshed, and refocus, and then scatter the rest of the week to take His love to their neighborhoods and communities.

Pastor Bill Hybels has said, "The Church is the hope of the world." And he's right! Jesus, working through Sunday people, has altered the altitude of our world.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus announced that nothing was going to stop Him from building His church. And nothing has. Today, the church of Jesus is billions strong, and growing daily.

I was at a conference a few weeks ago and one speaker was talking about the fact that over the last 30 years the nation of Guatemala has been transformed. Church growth in Guatemala City has been explosive. Recently one church growth expert was doing research on why the church had grown so rapidly. When they asked the pastors in it had been the result of dramatic revival the pastors said no. It was the result of simple people simply telling others.

One story from Guatemala was told of a lady who had given her life to Christ. She had been homeless, but people from the church reached out to her and had helped her. One day she was getting onto a bus. She noticed that the bus driver seemed to be in pain. She asked him about it and he said that he had a sore back. She asked if she could pray for him and the man, who was from a Catholic background said sure. He was thinking that perhaps she would pray for him when she got home or light a candle for him in the cathedral. She leaned over and right there placed her hands on his head and began to pray. God touched that man and immediately he felt his back snap into place and the pain was completely gone. He stood up and began jumping up and down in the bus. Everyone was cheering and praising God. That bus driver went on to be a leading pastor in that city. Simple people simply telling others.

3. Jesus will Build His Church

World history is not over, but we know where it is headed. There are a lot of huge issues facing our world today, but we know from the Bible in the end what will happen. We know that one day Jesus will return.

Revelation 19:6-9 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. 8 Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) 9 Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' " And he added, "These are the true words of God."

One day Christ will return. God describes here the greatest event of all time, wedding supper of the Lamb. It's a real day, and it is really coming. The Bible says that we will be dressed that day in fine linen, and "Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people."

Make sure you don't miss the party. People get to heaven because of grace through faith. In a first-century wedding, the first act of a groom was to pay the bride price. Jesus paid that price on the cross of Calvary. Bride, you've been paid for.

Once the bride price has been paid, the bride returns home to prepare for her wedding. She makes everything for her new home, including her wedding garments.

If you're a Christ follower, your price into heaven has already been paid. Now is the time to create your clothes. Our own righteousness does not save us, but because of the salvation we have in Christ we seek offer up our lives to God in thankfulness. God sees these acts, these expressions of love.

Some day we will all stand before Jesus and give an account of our lives. We will have to give an account of what we did with the gifts and grace given to us. More than anything I could receive in this world, I want to hear "well done" from my Savior on that day.

However, we need to remember that to attend the party a price has to be paid. We seek to serve God not to be saved but because we have been saved, there is a HUGE difference.

Alexandra Flynn of Fremont, Nebraska, was looking forward to the 2002 homecoming dance. She left home in high spirits, but she realized once she reached the school that she did not have her high school ID with her. When the man at the door refused her admission without her ID, so she went home to get it. Unable to find it, her mother went with her back to the dance to identify her and to explain. Again, the daughter was refused admission without the ID. Alex had the tickets in her hand. Even though Alexandra Flynn of Fremont High is Student Body President, plays cello in the orchestra, is on the Honor Roll, is the school's head cheerleader, and she spent hours decorating the gym for the Homecoming Dance the day before, she was still not admitted. Did I mention she was homecoming queen? But, she never did get in. In a similar way, getting into heaven isn't a matter of our good deeds and accomplishments. Without Jesus Christ, we have no ID to get into heaven.

Thanksgiving is a time when we thank God for his goodness and provision. I am sure every one of us here has lots to be thankful for in the past year. As we come to the communion table this morning, we are coming with a thankful heart. We thank God for what He has done in our lives – our salvation. We thank God for what He is doing in our lives today, and we look forward to the time we will be with Him forever in heaven.