

START RIGHT HERE

START
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HERE
DEVO

BY

MARK HALL

WITH

TIM LUKE

CASTING CROWNS



**S T A R T
R I G H T
H E R E
D E V O**

B Y

M A R K H A L L

W I T H

T I M L U K E

"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

- 2 Chronicles 7:14 ESV

The song "Start Right Here" doesn't pull punches. It is my candid response to what I see happening in the Church today. It is meant not as criticism but as a loving reminder from an accountability partner. It is no coincidence that the first two sections of the first verse and the chorus all begin with the words, "We want...." That pretty much sums up the attitude of Americans today. I'm afraid it has permeated Christ's Church.

While we drift further away from what Church is supposed to be, it seems we're getting more involved in what we think the world is supposed to be.

We fire out opinions and convictions in tweets and posts, and we take a stand on everything that's happening somewhere else. It's amazing how many of us have an opinion on a major issue until that issue shows up in our family. It's so much easier to throw a rock at somebody far away. We take our stands on things that don't cost us. When it doesn't cost us to take a stand on something, maybe we don't need to say what we're about to say. Maybe that's for someone else to take a stand on—someone who is actually in the trenches in that particular problem or heartache.

I've learned the hard way that when we throw our words, we rarely hit the people we're aiming at; we almost always hit someone else. We feel like we're close to a lot of the controversial topics of our day just because they're on a social media app on our phones. Instead of letting our voices be heard, sometimes we need to be willing to listen to the hearts of others and let our love be seen. Biblical Christianity is personal, not impersonal. It's an invitation, not a condemnation.

We want politicians to take care of everything. We want our pet causes at the forefront. We want all the right laws passed. I'm all for voting our scripturally informed conscience, but no president is going to save our country. No president is going to save our families. He or she does not exist. One Person will.

Only Jesus.

We want laws to take care of all the bad stuff for us. The tyrants that we want to kneel and the walls that we want to see fall down? We can't legislate that. But 2 Chronicles 7:14 says, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

That's an if-then statement. There's not even a way to mess up that verse. There's no way to read it wrong. It starts with the Church. In our heart of hearts, we really do want the walls that divide us to fall down and the land to be healed, but when we examine where the Church is headed, it's not going anywhere near the direction of 2 Chronicles 7:14.

While we always know exactly what everyone else needs to do get right, God seems to always want to talk to me about my own heart. Every single time.

If **my people** who are called by **my name** will humble **themselves** and turn from **their** wicked ways....

It doesn't really matter what we want to start happening in the world out there. If we want anything eternal to happen, it has to start with us. It has to start right here.

Have you ever said or posted something for which you originally thought you had good intentions but later realized you acted in the wrong spirit? What did you learn that now informs your actions and responses?

If God wants us to "start right here," what does that look like for you? With all of the turmoil in our world today, what is the Lord impressing upon your heart when you read 2 Chronicles 7:14?

SESSION 2

"And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to

me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.'"

- Luke 15:11-22 ESV

The prodigal son in Luke 15 enjoys a life of abundance, and he knows half of a sizeable inheritance is coming his way. The fact that he has an estate to inherit shows his family is wealthy. But waiting on half of the estate isn't good enough. He has to have it now.

In my mind, I can just see the prodigal son working in his father's field. He's drenched in sweat and has a cramp in his back. He's filthy. He's parched. He lifts his head to feel a cool breeze and notices that none of the laborers in the next field is working. Everyone is milling around, drinking cold water, and eating fruit. It's almost his break time, too, but everything looks better over there, and they're only hired workers...

If I'm a son and all this is really mine, why do I have to do all of this hard work? It would be so freeing to have my inheritance now. That's what I want. I want what is rightfully mine, and I want it now.

That's the lie the son fell for, and that's the lie we've all fallen for. We want it all, and we want it now.

The son wants his share of the inheritance without submitting to the authority that would be in place until his father dies. In other words, when he asked his dad for his inheritance, he communicated, "I wish you were dead."

So the prodigal son runs. Life is good at first, but he soon squanders all his possessions on wanton living. He discovers that the boundaries and the life that his father had given him were as good as it gets. Back home, he had everything he ever needed—only to assume he was missing out on something better. When you drill down into his motives, he wanted freedom. Freedom is a code word for control. The prodigal son wanted the reins of his own existence.

Too often we want what comes along with God but we don't really want God. We want the peace and comfort and joy. But, more than anything, we want control. The way we live shows we don't want God to control our lives, and yet we still have the audacity to wonder, "How can I get all of that peace stuff too?"

The giant lie at the end of all of our own plans is that they're still not going to take us far enough to satisfy. Usually when we're running from God, the end game is not in mind. The now is in mind.

When you're running from God, you'll still have quiet moments. God is right there in those quiet moments, still reaching out to you. Have you ever noticed that when you're running from God you'll change the radio station away from the Christian song that is speaking to you or the sermon that is convicting you? The most miserable person on Earth is a believer trying to run from God. Whatever you're trying to do to run away from him, you can't keep the noise loud enough to drown him out. He won't let you—because you're his, no matter how much you want to try to be your own.

We'll paint over the truth to avoiding facing it. We'll paint it as judgment to get away from it. We'll paint it as a "worldview" so we can rationalize it away. We'll paint it as hate speech. We'll paint it as anything we can imagine to avoid dealing with it. That's why we believers must be in God's Word for ourselves. Whatever someone else may say to us, we can figure out a way to discount it. But when we're alone and the room gets quiet, we know. Deep down, we know we can't discount God's truth.

Many of us have run hard enough and far enough that we thought we could never come back home. We've told ourselves, "God is gonna be

finished with me.”

We can never forget that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:37-39). His love is always there. It's there right now. If you recognize that still, small voice persistently calling out to you, it's proof that God is with you right now. His love is inescapable, and it always calls out to us when we go our own way...

It's time to stop running now. You don't need to have it all figured out. You just need to come home.

Can you remember a time when you wanted the “stuff” of God more than you wanted God himself? What were the results of your actions, how did you respond, and how did you grow from the experience?

In what ways does your current walk with the Lord reflect a self-centered attitude? Are you counting on anything or anyone other than God to satisfy you? Have you wondered from your spiritual home? How would the Lord have you respond?

SESSION 3

“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

Luke 15:20 ESV

After the prodigal son comes to himself in Luke 15:17, he heads home to beg his father to forgive him and take him back and hire him as a servant. That's when love moved first.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

The picture is that of a loving father who not only didn't turn away from his wayward son but also didn't even pause to ask a word about where the son had been or what he had done. He simply fell on his neck and kissed him.

His boy was home.

Even when the prodigal wanted to go home, it never entered his mind that he would be anything more than slave. That's strange. Did his dad ever do anything to communicate that message? Certainly not, but the prodigal knew what he deserved and knew what he probably would do if the roles were reversed:

"Well, if I were dad I tell you what I'd do. I'd tell my son, 'You get off my property, and maybe, just maybe, you can hang around outside of the gate for a few weeks. I'll let you know if I'm going to let you in.'"

We think the same way. We assume God is like us. We assume God loves like we love. We assume his anger is like ours. We assume his patience is like ours, and no one is more dangerous than a Christian who's right. We have power when we're right, and we fantasize of showing people exactly who we'd be if we were in control. We would rain down fire, and people who wronged us would be toast.

The prodigal based his picture of the father upon what he knew he deserved and what he would do if he were the authority. He didn't see any way back to the father because the father owed him nothing. The son already had taken everything coming to him after his dad liquidated assets. He even may have put his dad in debt just to go off and do his thing. He figured his father could never forgive him and take him back without severe retribution.

When you're not in the Word for yourself, you have to figure out God by yourself. In my darkest times, I thought, *"There's no way to get back to him. I've already done everything I ever learned you're not supposed to do. It just doesn't seem like there's a way."* And that's when the hopelessness came.

In such moments, we have to remember the runaway's father. When the prodigal was a long way off, the father came running. It was socially unacceptable and unmanly for men to run in Palestine. The father's actions would've left Jesus' hearers stunned and even offended as he told this story. But love doesn't care. Love always moves first.

Have you ever been so far away from God that you felt he could never welcome you back? As you reflect on the actions of the father in the story of the prodigal son, do you remember the time you tasted God's forgiveness and felt his grace wash over you? What similarities do you see between your story and that of the prodigal son?

Are you withholding forgiveness and grace from someone? Knowing God's Word says we are to forgive others even as we are forgiven, how should you respond toward the person and circumstances the Holy Spirit has brought to your mind in these moments?

SESSION 4

"For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like."

James 1:23-24 ESV

A mirror is nothing but truth.

Even if the world's best artist drew a picture of you, something would be inaccurate. You'd say, "Oh, no, my nose isn't that big. My ears aren't that wide and my eyes aren't that close together. It looks like a Volkswagen. It doesn't look like me."

James 1:23-24 says, "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like."

You can't argue with a mirror. It is what it is.

But in the first century, most mirrors were metal surfaces hammered into as fine a shine as possible. They produced only dull reflections. You got a decent idea of how you looked, but it was nothing like our glass mirrors today. It was easy to walk away with an imperfect picture of your face.

But in the first century, most mirrors were metal surfaces hammered into as fine a shine as possible. They produced only dull reflections. You got a decent idea of how you looked, but it was nothing like our glass mirrors today. It was easy to walk away with an imperfect picture of your face.

In the same way, a person who listens to truth but doesn't do truth loses what he looks like as a Christ-follower. James says we're hearers rather than doers of the Word when we live as if we go to a hazy metal mirror, run our hands through our messy hair a few times, and take off into an unkempt day. We forget what we look like, and the results are ugly.

Thankfully, James doesn't mince words. He offers a blunt, practical answer in the next verse: "But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing" (v. 25).

The answer is to be a disciple who "looks into" the perfect law of liberty, God's Word, and then acts in accordance. That means the believer looks into Scripture as though it's a mirror and says, "God, show me what needs to change. I'm all yours."

When we look at Scripture that way, not forgetting what we have heard but doing it, we honor God. We tell him we value nothing more than his shaping presence in our lives.

Scripture will stick a mirror in a believer's face as God says in a loving way, "I love you, but this is you. This is what we need to talk about and change."

When we answer, "Lord, you showed me something. I looked into your mirror and I saw it. I really need to work on that," we take that all-important initial step toward becoming doers of the Word.

As you hold up the mirror of God's Word to your life, what is God saying to you about your walk with him right now? Do you sense God leading you to any changes he would like you to make?

Is there anything in your life right now where you are being more of a hearer of the Word than a doer? What is the one step you can take today to become a doer of God's Word in that particular circumstance?

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”

Psalm 139:23-24 ESV

We want change.

We want our country to change. We want our government leaders to change. We want our bosses to change. We want our jobs to change. We want our homes to change. We want our spouses to change. We want our kids to change. We even want our churches to change. We want everything to change.

Everything, that is, except us.

We don't need to change. We're just fine. If everybody could just be more like us....

Sometimes it seems like we forget that God's grace and mercy to us is the same grace and mercy he extends to others. It's like we forget how his Holy Spirit awakened us, saved us out of the pigpen, and, many times thereafter, restored us from our wayward choices. Instead of focusing our 20/20 vision on what's wrong with everyone with whom we don't agree, maybe we should focus on our own hearts. Maybe we should join the Psalmist, look inward, and ask the Holy Spirit to point out where we can be more like Jesus.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24)

In John 15, both the prodigal son and the elder brother wanted the stuff that went along with their father, but they didn't want their father. One grieved his father by being a sinful rebel. The other grieved his father with his righteousness—his *own* righteousness.

The elder brother turned his nose and puffed his chest at his father's response to his wayward brother. He didn't run off like his brother, but his soul was just as dead. This is the brother who stayed home. He did what he was supposed to do. He did his chores. He worked hard. He led. He was there for his dad. He gave blood, sweat, and tears his whole life, but along with it came a sense of self-righteousness and entitlement. He didn't value his place in the family as the son of a loving and benevolent father. Instead, he found his worth in what he did and didn't do.

His attitude screamed, “I'm working hard. I'm serving. I'm here every

time I'm needed. I don't run off and waste my life. I don't party. I don't hang around with bad characters. I'm better than that little brat." Instead of grasping the fact that his father loved and accepted him as a dear son, he believed he made himself a worthy son by his conduct.

The elder brother compared himself to his younger brother and figured he was better. Instead of celebrating his younger brother's homecoming, he resented his return. Instead of empathizing with a loved one who caved to the flesh, he heralded his own perceived glory. Instead of walking a mile in someone else's shoes, he wouldn't even walk across the yard to hug his rescued brother.

Sometimes we can get in the bubble of church world and look at everyone else through behavior glasses. Or we see others through our affinities and groups and likes and personal experiences. Instead of looking at them through Jesus' eyes, we look through our own filters, and, when we see people who don't live like we do, we get mad at them. I call it "sinvy"—short for *sin envy*. We actually resent them for getting the pleasure of doing what lost people do.

We're good at hiding it, but sometimes we grow bitter when the world gets to scratch the itches that our flesh longs to get scratched. Something rises up in us because depriving the flesh is hard. It's hard to say no to the world. It's hard to rationalize other people's behavior.

We compare ourselves to others to make ourselves feel better. We see their shortcomings, and the elder brother in us rolls his eyes.

When trouble hits and we suffer, it's easy to grow angry as we compare ourselves to others who seem to float through life. We look at them like the elder brother looked at the prodigal. We feel that since we live right, we should be blessed in ways that benefit us right here and right now. This is self-centered and shortsighted.

First, we never know what's going on in other people's lives, which makes comparison such a devil's lie. We never know how badly others are struggling—no matter how shiny their packaging. Secondly, the bottom line is that it doesn't matter what we want. It matters what God wants. And you know what God wants?

Change.

Can you look back at a time when you acted like the elder brother in response to someone else's actions? What was the outcome and what would you do differently in a similar situation?

As you ask the Lord to search your heart, is there anyone toward whom you are harboring a judgmental or vindictive attitude? Are you envious of anyone? What do you need to confess to the Father who longs for you to be holy just as he is holy?

SESSION 6

"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."

James 1:19-21 ESV

Before his death, James wrote a letter to tell scattered and persecuted Christians that faith and works are not mutually exclusive but go hand-in-hand. The epistle also gives instruction on self-control: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:19-21).

If social media is any indication, we believers are not heeding this passage.

With all that is going on with Covid-19, racial tensions, protests, riots, and various natural disasters, it is no wonder that many of us feel on edge. But James didn't put a qualifier in this verse. He said we all should be quick to hear and slow to speak and slow to get angry. If ever there was a time to hush and listen, it is now.

Are we willing to stop and listen to find out why our neighbor is hurting? Are we willing in the middle of these massive societal issues to stop and

open our hearts and listen to one friend whose plight or perspective can make it personal for us?

When someone wrongs me or pushes my buttons, I'm usually very quick to come right back at him. This moment, right now in America, could not be a worse time to continue that bad habit. As believers, we should start listening past others' hurts to hear the heart behind the hurt. We need to learn to discipline our tongues and bathe our responses in Scripture. We should ask, "God, search my heart. Why am I about to say this? What is my goal? Am I about to say this or post this because I'm offended and mad, or is it because I truly want to point people to Jesus and see people come together?"

Most of us have heard or read the first part of this passage in James. It's practical, makes sense, and resonates with all believers, but sometimes we skim right past verse 21: "Receive with meekness the implanted word."

James tells us to do what we already know to do. In other words, stop coming to church looking for some new thing. A lot of folks struggle with this. We want some new, deeper idea or approach. We need someone to discover a new book of the Bible so we can be interested again. James says that if believers would obey what's already been planted in us through God's Word, we'd be squarely in the middle of God's will. And we wouldn't have enough room in our churches every Sunday.

Then comes the familiar Verse 22: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

As you pursue Christ with your whole heart by loving him, his Word, and other people in his name, you become more like him. That is the beautiful simplicity of the gospel.

The words we say are the overflow of our hearts. May we so saturate ourselves in God's Word and so practice the presence of his Holy Spirit that we listen and speak with one motive: to show a lost and desperate world its only hope is the Jesus we know.



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