

FIVE ABSOLUTES

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Lord be with us as we look at Your Word; inspire us with Your Holy Spirit. Fill every place, this place where I am, and Lord, every home where Your Word is going to be listened to. Master, fill it with Your Spirit, illumine us and help us to take it and apply it to our lives, for we pray this in the beautiful name of Jesus. Amen.

As I look at what's going on in the world around us, and the difficulties that so many people are facing (and I know I am preaching to the choir here). Each one of us is facing so much trouble because of what is going on with the COVID-19 virus.

I was trying to see what our response must be as we navigate as Christians in this world. So, I looked at scripture which has so much to say about difficulties and hardships and suffering.

2 Timothy 2:3

Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9

We have troubles all around us, but we are not defeated. We do not know what we need to do, but we do not give up the hope of living. We are persecuted but God does not leave us; we are hurt sometimes but we are not destroyed.

2 Corinthians 6:3-5

We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry. In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. Difficult days, difficult times.

John 16:33

Jesus Himself said, "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in Me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

Romans 12:11-12

Be not lacking in diligence, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord, rejoice in hope, be patient in affliction, be persistent in prayer.

1 Peter 5:9-10

Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are. In His kindness, God called you to share in His eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So, after you have suffered a little while, He will restore, support, and strengthen you, and He will place you on a firm foundation.

So beloved, as you and I go through difficult times and we accept that this is something that we must realize as part of our own lives, what does God offer to us as ones who name Him as Lord and Savior? That must be the question. I believe God's presence rises like a lighthouse

for His children – not to bring us safely to the shore and keep us there, but to help us navigate the storms of life and to be able to go forward on our journeys and the courses that He has set for us. I have it on good information. I was talking to somebody who knows these things, and he told me that ships will never turn back from a storm. They are built to go through the storm. They may slow down, try to circumvent the eye of the storm, but they will move from point A to point B unless there is a dire emergency, a medical emergency, or something like that. But the ship will move from point A to point B and that's how we too need to move. We are here in life and we have a course to follow and God is willing us to move through difficult times.

Somebody said, "A ship may be safe in harbor, but that is not why it was made." It was never made to sit in harbor. It was meant to go through choppy waters, stormy waters and to reach its destination. God guides us through, beloved, even during these times. But I believe that those of us who love the Lord and serve Him and are called according to His purposes, we have a special space in which He calls us to walk, so that He can have direct input into the way that we are going.

What is that special space? It's called His kingdom. We are called to be part of His kingdom and within His kingdom, He is able to bring all His resources to bear, so that we can walk along the course that we have to walk. Whether it involves difficulty or touch situations or circumstances, God brings all that He has to bear within His kingdom that we are called to be a part of.

John the Baptist used to say, "Repent for the kingdom of God is near." Jesus Himself talked about the kingdom of God being near and to repent and to believe (Matthew 4). He also used it when He was teaching His disciples how to pray: "Let your kingdom come." Then when He was talking about the beatitudes: "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And of course, the verse that each one of us ought to know by heart, that we must seek His kingdom and His righteousness and everything else will then get taken care of.

So, His kingdom is crucial and critical to us navigating choppy seas. That is the point I'm trying to make, and we'll amplify it as we go along. But the entry point to God's kingdom is to be able to repent and to accept Jesus as our Savior. That's the entry point! Then, as we continue to move through the kingdom, we have to also accept Him as Lord, as one who is above us. We have to have allegiance to Jesus and loyalty to the kingdom. Those are requirements of citizenship in His kingdom. So, if you have accepted Jesus as Savior, you are part of His kingdom. And as part of His kingdom, you need to now accept His Lordship as well. In other words, Jesus must be in charge.

Now, within the kingdom of God, we need to have principles that we need to follow. If we are citizens of God's kingdom, then what are principles or absolutes, as I like to say, that we need to have as part of being in His kingdom?

What is an absolute? It is a value or principle which is regarded as universally valid, or which may be viewed without relation to other things. Universally valid within His kingdom, and not dependent on situations or circumstances that we will face within the kingdom of God or outside of His kingdom but which don't have a bearing on those absolutes. So, what would be absolutes for you and me within the kingdom of God? I am going to outline for us five absolutes:

1. Worship Him Regardless.

We worship Him regardless of our circumstances. The Bible says that we bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord. sacrificially we bring it, and maybe that, sacrificially, we are bringing it through our situations, through our circumstances, through difficult times. It's a sacrifice to come before Him with praise and thanksgiving.

But what is worship? It comes from the old English word 'worth-ship', which means that we ascribe worth to somebody. When we worship God, we are ascribing worth to God. We are telling Him that He is worthy of all our worship; we're telling Him that He is worthy of leading us. We are telling Him that He is worthy of our praises, that we can sing and honor Him because He is our God. We have to ask the question of you and me – when was the last time that we ascribed worth to God and told Him how worthy He is? That is an absolute in the kingdom of God, that whatever our situation and circumstance, we must be able to worship Him.

Remember Paul and Silas in Acts, chapter 16: They had been put in prison. The crowd had joined against them, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. Then after they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into a prison, and the jailor was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. What do you think they did? At about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. In the midst of all of their difficulties, they were praising God with their songs of praise. We need to be able to worship Him in spite of what you and I are going through. God deserves our worship. We ascribe worth to Him.

2. Trust Him Regardless.

We trust Him regardless of our circumstances. Remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in Daniel chapter 3. You will recall that King Nebuchadnezzar had made this huge statue of gold and, at the sound of the trumpets, the lyre and the lutes, and all the musical instruments, everybody had to bow down before it. Of course, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't comply. So, people came to Nebuchadnezzar and told him that these three men, whom you had put in charge of so much, are refusing to bow down. In 3:14, Nebuchadnezzar says to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that you refuse to serve my gods, or to worship the gold statue I have set up? I will give you one more chance to bow down and worship the statue I have made, when you hear the sound of the musical instruments. But if you refuse, you will be thrown immediately into the blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my power?"

Listen to their response. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue from your power, your Majesty. But even if He doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up."

God is able, beloved. We trust Him to do the right thing here, and even if it doesn't work out for our benefit, in getting us out we are still not going to do what you want us to do. In spite of your situations and circumstances, God commands our trust. We must be able to say, "Lord, through these difficult times, I trust You to take me through. I cannot see anything.

It's bleak out there. The future doesn't seem to be so good. But Lord, I trust You. I'm putting my hand in Yours. Will You lead me through these difficult times?"

Jeremiah 17:7-8

But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him, they will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes, its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

How wonderful! We need to be like that tree planted by the water. We need to have that kind of confidence in Him because we trust Him implicitly.

Psalms 143:8

Let the morning bring me word of Your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in You. Show me the way I should go, for to You I entrust my life.

The second absolute in God's kingdom is that we trust Him implicitly in every situation that we face.

3. Give to Him Regardless

We give to Him regardless of our circumstances. We read in Leviticus 27:30 that the tithe was holy unto the Lord. God required that His people should give back to Him.

What is a tithe. It is nothing but 10 percent. God said that the tithe is holy; it belongs to Me. In fact, in His word, in Malachi 3, he says to the priests, "You are robbing Me," and they say, "How are we robbing You?" And God says, "Because you withhold the tithe. The tithe belongs to Me." If you and I keep it, then we are in fact, robbing God. We are keeping for ourselves what belongs to God. I don't know about you, but if the tithe is holy, I don't want to hang on to it. I want to make sure that it goes back to God as His requirement for each one of us. If we hold our finances back from God, we are rebelling against what He wants in our lives. That's not just a bad habit, or a philosophical difference; it's a heart problem.

I like this quote by Bryon Jewell: "It's also tragic because God doesn't just use the tithe to fund the work of the church, or to draw your heart closer to Him. He uses the tithe to bless your life. People who don't tithe are really shortchanging themselves by resisting what God asks from them. They miss out on much of what God has for them."

Sheila and I have tithed from when we were small children. We've always given the tithe, whether we've had or not, whether we had a salary coming in or not, whether we've had to take a cut in what we are getting or not. Whether we've had no money that is coming in, and precious little, just enough for food – we've made sure that we have tithed. But here's the thing: we have never ever wanted in our lives. Never! Not once have we failed to get food on our table. Not once has God failed to provide for us. We have believed that the tithe belongs to God and we will give it.

I know that in times like this, when you are not sure of the next month whether you will get a salary or not, the tendency is to hold on. But do you know what we do when we hold on? We are saying: I want to be in charge of my life and how I'm going to navigate it. We take away the responsibility of our lives from God. God is really the one who is responsible for your life

and mine. He's the one who is responsible for your EMIs and putting food on the table – taking care of you. He is the one. But when we withhold from giving to Him, we are saying that we can handle it. We can take care of it. Why would you want to do that? Why not give to Him what is His? The tithe is holy. Let's make sure that we give to Him. Especially during these days, when we want to make sure that our dependence is on God, and that we are saying, "God, You are responsible for my life and the things that need to happen, and taking care of me and my family during this time."

Some of you may have never tithed, for whatever reason. I want to say to you today – why don't you give God a chance? Test Him. The only time He says, "Test Me!" is regarding the tithe, giving to Him. Test Him. In this time when you are going through difficult times, give to Him and then see how He comes through for you.

4. Pray to Him Regardless.

We must pray to Him regardless of our situations and circumstances. I know that when times get difficult, some of us move closer to Him. We cling to Him and we say, "Lord, what's going on in my life. You've got to help me." And then there are some of us who move away from Him and say, "Lord, You know all things. You know what's going on in my life, and I'm not going to keep coming to You asking for Your help." We go through different extremes.

But for you and I who live as citizens of the kingdom, we need to make this a regular habit, that whatever our situation or circumstance, whether you think God knows it or not, whether we took it to Him yesterday or the day before, we need to come before Him and continue to pray. Pray without ceasing is the way, Paul said. Pray without ceasing especially as we go through difficult times. Jesus always modelled that. Right through His earthly ministry, He kept moving away to spend time in prayer. And at His most dire moment in the garden of Gethsemane, He prayed. Stephen, when he was being stoned, prayed. In difficult times, beloved, we need to draw close to Him and not move away.

Philippians 4:6

Don't worry about anything; instead pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

So, if you are thinking God knows everything about me, He knows the difficult times I am in, He knows what I need, He is omniscient – I am not going to tell Him. Beloved, that's exactly what the evil one would want you to do, to draw away and adopt that position.

Remember blind Bartimaeus? Jesus was moving away from Jericho. As He was passing, Bartimaeus shouted out to Him. He broke into Jesus' day, His agenda and he said, "I want You to do something for me." It was God's will for that to happen. But it was God's will for Bartimaeus to call out to Jesus. God wants us to call out to Him. Why? Because He gets a kick out of it? No! Because it increases our faith. Every time we are obedient and we call to God, and we come to Him, we are increasing our own faith through obedience to Him.

So beloved, maybe today is the day to move away from that corner or that position you have adopted, and say, “Lord, I’m sorry. I moved away saying that You know all things. But Lord, can I just tell You that this is what I am going through. I need You to intervene on my behalf.”

5. Rejoice in Him Regardless.

We need to rejoice in Him regardless of our circumstances. That’s a difficult one. You’re probably going to look at me and say, “Pastor, all the first four are okay, and I can try that. But to feel happy, be joyful during this time? That’s a toughie.” Let’s see what the Bible has to say.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

*Though the fig tree should not blossom
And there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail
And the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold
And there be no cattle in the stalls,
Yet I will exult in the Lord,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
The Lord God is my strength,
And He has made my feet like hinds’ feet,
And makes me walk on my high places.*

I will exult in the Lord. I will rejoice in Him. Paul writing to the church at Philippi from prison says this, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say it, rejoice.” How do we rejoice in difficult situations? I think the answer is by remembering, isn’t it?

This beautiful son that we all know says: Count your blessings, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

When upon life’s billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings; name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

Are you ever burdened with a load of care?
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?
Count your many blessings; ev’ry doubt will fly,
And you will keep singing as the days go by.

When you look at others with their lands and gold,
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold.
Count your many blessings, money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven nor your home on high.

Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

Beloved, in times past and as we remember, as those memories flood into our minds, let joy arise and let us rejoice in the God of our salvation.

So, we bring these five absolutes – worship, trust, giving, prayer and rejoicing. Absolute non-negotiables in the kingdom of God. Not an exhaustive list, but I believe ones that are foundational to our well-being, foundational to us navigating the storms of life.

So in closing, may I say to each one of us:

Let us worship Him with abandon.
Let us trust Him implicitly.
Let us give to Him cheerfully.
Let us pray regularly, and
Let us rejoice continually.

Now may the God of peace who, through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead, our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with every good thing to do His will. And may He accomplish in us what is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen and amen.

Shall we pray together?

Lord, we acknowledge that these are troubled times. But Lord, we also want to acknowledge that You are like a lighthouse to us. You are the power in our sails. You are the wind that drives us. You are the one who protects us and sustains us. You are the one who takes us through stormy seas to our journey's end. And Lord, as we seek to put these absolutes into our lives, help us Lord. empower us through Your Holy Spirit, we ask in the powerful and beautiful name of Jesus. Amen.

Church, tomorrow we will be celebrating our 23rd anniversary and one of the songs that has been just constant over these 23 years, has been a song that we started on the first day and have sung it every since. Lift Jesus higher. We are going to sing it together. Let's lift Jesus higher; higher and higher and higher today more than any other day because we celebrate His faithfulness in our lives over these 23 years.

Lift Jesus higher, lift Jesus higher
Lift Him up for the world to see.
He said, "If I be lifted up from the earth,
I will draw all men unto me."

I hope you enjoyed that. In the midst of all that we are going through and talking about the five absolutes, let's not forget how much God loves us, loves you and loves me.

Zephaniah 3:17

He rejoices over us with singing, or He spins out of control with His love for us.

That's the kind of love He gives to you and me, His children. We are sons and daughters of His. So as we move through, let's not forget that God loves us incredibly, that His love envelopes us and will carry us through these difficult times.

Please receive this benediction.

Dearly beloved, the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you His peace. The name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.