
Alright, well, what's up Traders Point family? Those of you in the room, we've got some of our team here, and everybody online, we are so thrilled to have you, wherever you may be. We know we have people joining us from all over the country and even around the world.

We just can't celebrate it enough. If you haven't already heard, we are regathering in two short weeks on Sunday, September 20. We are really fired up about that. So, we can put our hands together.

I just want you to know that our team is working really, really hard to create a safe, yet a joyful, experience at all four of our campuses. You can go to this link right here to get all the information on our regathering.

[TPCC.ORG/REGATHERING](https://tpcc.org/regathering)

I want you to think about somebody you can invite. Maybe it's somebody who joined us online in the last six months, but they've never been to a physical campus. I want to encourage you to jump on a serve team, if you've never served before because this is going to be an "all hands on deck" kind of a thing.

I also want to say there may be a number of you who are just not ready to come back or not able to come back for a number of reasons. Maybe you're in a high risk category. Maybe you're just not comfortable coming back yet. Maybe you don't even live in Indy, so it would be quite a commute for you to come to a physical campus.

I just want you to know we totally understand all of that, and we support you. Traders Point Online, TPO, is not going anywhere, and we want to continue to ask you to engage with us online right where you are.

Here's what I would say. Be the church where you are, which means don't just watch alone, don't just consume content for yourself, but be involved in the lives of other people. Get into a group. Go to a watch party or host a watch party. We would like to help you take the next steps in your spiritual journey, wherever you may be.

Well, it was the 1930's and a man named Harry Bailey was about to lose his family, but he didn't know it. He and his wife had been married for several years. They had a few kids, a growing family, but they were beginning to grow further and further apart in their marriage relationship.

A young attractive woman sort of caught his eye at work, and he liked the way she made him feel. It wasn't long until that turned into an affair. So, Harry would oftentimes come home from work. He would eat dinner with his family, then he would announce that he forgot something back at the office, or he had to go run an errand. But he really wasn't fooling anybody.

His wife began to catch on to what was happening. She tried to intervene, but he denied. Nothing seemed to work. One day when Harry came home for the day, he found an empty house. His wife had packed her and the kids' things up. In their place, she had left a letter on the kitchen counter explaining to him that she was leaving and she wanted a divorce.

It was as if in that instant, the veil that had previously been blinding him got pulled back to the reality of what was happening. Harry dropped to his knees in that empty house and he began to weep, realizing what he had just traded. It wasn't a good trade.

For the next year or so, he drifted. He struggled with depression, he was angry, he was hopeless. But Harry had a couple of friends who happened to be followers of Jesus. They wouldn't give up on him. They were praying for him. They were reaching out to him. They were loving him right where he was.

They kept inviting him to the church they went to. The name of the church was Racine Christian Church, kind of a small church right outside of town. And Harry would politely decline their invitation for a couple of reasons.

He had never been much of a religious man, and he was a divorcee due to an affair he had. He thought all it was going to take was for them to find out what he had done, and then, "They are going to sling all kinds of shame and judgement my way. Thanks, but no thanks."

But his friends were persistent, and there was something different about them. So, after about a year of those invites, Harry reluctantly gave in, mostly just to get them off his back.

Harry went to church. And what he experienced wasn't what he thought he would experience. He experienced love and grace from this imperfect group of people. And he heard the gospel message. It was different than the religious message he thought he was going to hear: There is a God who loves you right where you are.

Within the next year, Harry ended up giving his life to Jesus and a radical transformation happened. Now, he wasn't perfect, but he was different.

Several months later he ended up meeting a young lady within that church, and they began to date. This time the relationship was based on something different. They eventually got married.

And then Harry began to feel the sense of conviction to reach back out to his former life, to reconnect with his kids. Because he did that, it made an impact upon them. They began to attend church. It actually changed the trajectory of their lives. Harry had a son who then ended up giving his life to Jesus. He grew up and had a daughter who gave her life to Jesus. Then, she had a son who gave his life to Jesus. The reason I know that to be true is because that is me.

Harry Bailey was my great grandfather. And I have to tell you that we briefly overlapped a little bit. I was a really small boy when he died. I vaguely remember going to his funeral, I don't remember him much. I know I was around him. But I can't wait one day to get to heaven and to sit down with my great grandfather. I'm so thankful he had a group of friends who didn't give up on him.

Here's the thing about Harry Bailey. There was a gap between the life Harry Bailey was living and the life God wanted him to live. There was a gap between the peace, the hope, and the joy and fulfillment that Harry Bailey was experiencing and the peace, the hope, and the joy and fulfillment God wanted him to have. Through his friends—they closed the gap, and then Jesus radically changed his life.

Here's what I know about me, and here's what I know about you even if we've never met. There's a gap between the life that maybe you're living. There's a gap between the life I'm

living and the life God wants you and me to live regardless of where we are in our spiritual journey.

There's a gap between maybe the influence that you could have and the influence God wants you to have. There's perhaps a gap right now in your friendships or maybe even your marriage and the friendships or marriage God wants you to have.

Maybe there's a gap in the financial peace that you could have if you would trust God in that area of your life and the financial stress or reality you're currently experiencing.

Here's really good news. Whatever the gap is for you, Jesus closes the gap. I love what it says in Ephesians 2 starting in verse 12:

"You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ."

Man, that's really good news. Somebody better put their hands together for that. That's all I've got to do, just read the verse, because that is it. If I could just summarize the entire Bible, if I dare, into one passage there are maybe several I could use that would be one of them; that we are brought near to God.

There is a gap and we can hardly comprehend just how radical the concept of Jesus' forgiveness is. Some of us don't know it, some of us have gotten so used to it that we've forgotten how potent that really is.

You see, religion allows a person to perhaps maybe feel worthy after they do whatever they can to cleanse themselves, which is impossible. Religion, actually what it says is if you can pay the price, if you can feel bad enough about yourself, then maybe you can be accepted. But be careful, because you could actually fall out of God's graces if you do enough bad things.

But the gospel says Jesus invites you just as you are, and Jesus connects you. And that Jesus reconciles you back to God. Through Jesus' effort and Jesus' effort alone, he closes the gap.

And for those of us who have experienced that, then the automatic, most natural thing we could do or should do is to close the gap for others. In fact, I would say that's the only appropriate response to God's grace.

If you're just now joining us, we are in a series in the Gospel of Luke. We are calling it *Settled in Spirit*. The reason why is because there are a lot of unsettled spirits in our world right now. We are having a difficult season.

Luke takes the time to write his gospel for a friend of his named Theophilus to close the gap for him. And he says, "Listen, I've taken the time to put together and orderly account so that you might come to believe."

So, we are looking at this together and we find a really great example of this in chapter 5 verse 27. So, if you would, just follow along with me as we unpack this passage together:

"Later, as Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi," and Levi is his Jewish name. Later his name is going to be changed to Matthew, which is his Aramaic name. And this is the same Matthew who writes the Gospel of Matthew. He is *"sitting at his tax collector's booth. 'Follow me and be my disciple,' Jesus said to him."*

Now, what I want you to know about this is Levi is a Jewish man who is working for the Roman IRS. Because of that, he is hated and despised for a couple of different reasons. The Romans taxed everything. Not only that, but they hated what they spent the money on. So, just naturally they despised Roman taxation.

In fact, the word tax collector in the Hebrew meant this:

Tax collector (mokhes): “oppression” and “injustice”

They just saw it as oppressive. If you were a Jewish person working for that corrupt system, then the Jewish community despised you all the more.

What I need you to understand is that Levi was shunned and ignored by the entire Jewish community. He was not allowed in their synagogues. In other words, Levi wouldn't have been welcomed at church. They would have seen him come in and said, “What are you doing here? You are an oppressive tax collector.”

And so, I'm sure he had gotten used to working the tax collector booth, and just feeling people ignore him or maybe be extremely rude toward him. And yet, here you had Jesus walk along. Jesus actually stops at the tax collector's booth. He looks him right in the eyeballs. That's maybe the first time that's happened in a long time.

I love what Jesus does here. Jesus doesn't say, “Let's get together. I'd like to find out a little bit about who you are. Talk to me. Share your heart with me.” Jesus just looks at him and says, “Hey Levi, follow me.” Like “I want you to be my disciple.”

Levi hadn't done anything to prove himself. Levi hadn't expressed any remorse at this moment. Jesus just goes right into his life and says, “I want you to be my disciple.”

Maybe what is even more surprising than what Jesus says to Levi is what Levi says to Jesus. Look at this:

“So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.”

Like, no questions asked. Like, this isn't just like follow him for a day. This isn't like, “Let me just pack things up at the tax collector's booth for today, and then I'll come back to it tomorrow.” No, this is the equivalent of him leaving his job. He just walked away from this very lucrative career.

Now, this isn't the first time we've seen this. In fact, several weeks ago, if you've been joining us in this study of Luke, Jesus calls a few fishermen to do the same thing. They leave their fishing nets and they follow after Jesus. I would contend that what Levi just did here was way more costly.

For starters, the fishermen were likely in a family business. It was a small family affair. And they would have left it to some other family members. If they'd wanted to, they could have gone back to it. In fact, many of them did. They were bi-vocational.

What Levi does here, he actually burns some bridges. He walks away from the tax collector booth, and there is no going back. There's no way they are going to let him come back to this position. They would have seen it as sort of breaking trust. Not only that, but as soon as he vacated the tax collector booth, there would have been a whole bunch of other young leaders in the organization ready and willing to take his place. So, Levi does something pretty dramatic.

So, what's Jesus doing here? Well Jesus was closing the gap for Levi. When he says, "Hey, follow me. Be my disciple," Jesus is saying, "There is a gap between the life that you could live and the life you're actually living. Let me close the gap. Levi, there is some hope and some joy and some fulfillment that you could have, and I want to close the gap for you."

And it dramatically changed Levi's life. And what I want you to see is that the very first thing Levi does is get his friends to Jesus as well. Look at it in verse 29:

"Later, Levi held a banquet in his home with Jesus as the guest of honor. Many of Levi's fellow tax collectors and other guests also ate with them."

Now, what I want you to see in that is that of all the things Levi could have done as a brand-new follower of Jesus, that's what he chooses to do.

Like Levi could have been, "Well, I guess I'm spiritual now, so I probably need to start listening to K-LOVE and get some spiritual friends." There is nothing wrong with K-LOVE.

Or he could have been like, "I need to put a Jesus Fish on the back of my camel. I shouldn't have a party because maybe that could get out of hand. They may get the wrong idea. So, let's have some people over and have some finger foods and some fellowship."

He could have said, "Hey, I'm actually kind of embarrassed. I don't know how my unchurched friends are going to think about this. Let me just kind of keep the Jesus things on the down-low for a little while. I'll just let my actions be my witness."

No, instead Matthew throws a party. This is a party for his former colleagues and drinking buddies. This is a party for the party girls, and even the guys who are going to go over in the corner and smoke pot later in the evening. He says, "I just want you to come over to my house because I want you to get in close proximity to Jesus."

Why? Because there's no way they are going to the synagogue. There's no way they would be welcomed there. There's no way they would feel welcomed there. So, he goes, "What do I do? What do I do? Well, let me get them over to my house because I want them to experience the love and the grace of Jesus."

Can I just ask you this question? Does that sound very spiritual to you? It's actually the most spiritual thing you could do. Because wherever you've had the gap closed in your life, the automatic response to grace is like the air that you breathe. You should very naturally want to close the gap for others.

Did Levi have all the answers? No way. Did Levi have it all figured out yet? Absolutely not. Did he know who did? You bet. He was like, "I just want to get my friends in close proximity to Jesus."

You know, one of the things I've been really challenged to is that for the last six months it's been so challenging and difficult. I've gotten to this place where I'm like, "I'm tired of being in the doom loop."

Is anybody tired of being in the doom loop? Is anybody tired of being anxious and worried. You know what? I fully believe that God is in control, and every time I go to the doom loop I think God takes offense, "I've got it. I'm in control."

One of the things I've begun to do just mentally in my mind, and now I'm even trying to put it down on paper, is just list all the ways I see God at work in this season. I would encourage you to do that same.

What is it that God is doing? I believe he is at work. I believe he's got a full plan for all this. He's not caught off guard by any of it. I believe one of the things God is doing is he is allowing the message of Jesus, if we'll allow him to work through us, to get to more people through this time.

You see, prior to the pandemic we would have roughly 10,000 people show up at our physical campuses. We would have maybe another 2 to 3,000 people join us online. But during this time, we have something around 16 or 17,000 people joining us consistently every weekend. As far as overall people who are engaging with us, it's more, not less.

I believe God is doing something. He is saying, "Hey listen, if they won't come to us, we'll go to them. They are stuck at home. They can't get into a physical gathering. That doesn't mean we can't go. That doesn't mean we can't help close the gap for others."

This is what Levi was doing. He was closing the gap between his friends and Jesus. And this should be the norm.

I've got to tell you, when I get to heaven there is a small list of people I am going to make a beeline to, who I want to sit down with, and hang out with and talk to. My great-grandfather, Harry Bailey, is one of them.

But do you know who else is on that list? The friends who invited him to church, the friends who didn't give up on my great-grandfather. The friends who didn't write him off. And I want to thank them. Because of their boldness to help close the gap, it changed the trajectory of my family tree. It changed my life.

But there were some people who weren't happy about it. There always are. Look at what it says in verse 30:

"But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with such scum?'"

And that is maybe one of the saddest questions in the Bible. And I love Jesus' response, because it is perfect:

"Jesus answered them, 'Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent.'"

Translation, "I've come to call people who are ready to get real." Not people who are faking it. Not people who kind of put on a fake-aide, but people who take off the mask and say, "This is me."

Jesus goes, "Anytime somebody gets real, they will never be turned away by me. They will never experience shame and judgement from me."

I love that analogy Jesus gives. I think it is brilliant. What he does here is the perfect balance between grace and truth. The Pharisees, what they often did... This is a trap.

And Jesus could have been hard on them and said, "You're right. What am I doing hanging out with them?" And that would have crushed their spirits, and they would have walked away.

Or, he could have been like, “Hey, they’re not that bad—and all of the sudden he is overlooking their sin.”

Jesus perfectly combines grace and truth. And he doesn’t excuse, deny, or minimize their sin. He acknowledges it. He’s like, “Yeah, they are sinning right now, in front of me. They are sinners.”

The question is, “What are we going to do about it?” Are we just going to create holy huddles? Are we just going to create an environment where Christians feel welcome? Are we going to create churches just for Christians, or are we going to, out of a response to the grace that has been given to us, close the gap and help people come to see the grace we’ve received?

And the analogy he gives us is so vivid in our minds. He’s like, “Yeah, they are totally sick, but I’m a doctor. And that’s what doctors do.” I love that.

Let’s just say that you’re not feeling very well and somebody says, “You ought to call this doctor’s office. She is a brilliant doctor. She knows so much. She knows so much about medicine and she is going to get you better.”

You’re like, “I’m on it,” so you call the doctor’s office and try to setup an appointment. They get all your details, and then the very last question they say, “Are you healthy right now, or are you sick?”

You’re like, “Well I’m sick.”

They’re like, “I’m sorry, we can’t see you because we only see healthy people.”

Now, I don’t care how much that doctor knows, she ain’t a good doctor because good doctors hang out with sick people. It’s part of what they do. And Jesus says, “I’m a doctor, and I’m going to hang out with sick people.”

When self-righteousness gets in the way of sick people getting to a doctor, Jesus has very little patience. Jesus had all kinds of patience with people and their baggage and the junk in their lives. But one thing he didn’t have patience for was self-righteousness. And he still doesn’t today. For two reasons:

Number one: we live in a world where people are desperately looking for hope. Would you not agree with that? It’s everywhere. People are looking for hope, especially nowadays.

And number two: when we, as Christ followers, mess this up, it messes people up. Sometimes for a long time. Perhaps even for eternity. And the message of the church is hope. In a world shrouded in darkness and that is constantly knocking you down, the message of Jesus is, “You can get back up. This time, try it by my grace.”

So, here is the question that I really want you to wrestle to the ground. This is for those of you who are following Jesus right now. I want you to wrestle this uncomfortable question to the ground.

Who am I closing the gap for?

And I don’t want you to go, “That’s an interesting question,” and then move on. I want you to camp on that for a little while. And I want you to give some thought to it. I want you to talk to God about this. I want you to talk about this around your dinner table or with your group.

And maybe a good way to think about this is maybe, “Who are the people in my life who would be the most difficult for me to close the gap for?” Maybe that is the question. And perhaps that’s who Jesus is calling you to love.

You see, maybe it’s a group of people. Maybe it’s people who have different political convictions than you do, or maybe they see social issues a little bit differently than you. And that’s who God is calling you to close the gap for. Because getting them to Jesus is the priority, not being right.

Maybe for you it’s a name. You just need to list a name. You just need to write it down on a piece of paper or put it into your phone.

How do I close the gap? Let’s go back to what Levi did? What did Levi do? Levi threw a party?

Can you do that? “Man, I’m just going to throw a party.” Why do you throw parties? So that people can come and not feel isolated anymore. People can come and let their guard down. People can come and get real. People can come and feel included and accepted.

Levi’s like, “I don’t really know how to engage in conversation with them about how God has changed my life, but let me just get them shoulder-to-shoulder with the man who changed mine.

And Jesus says his Spirit lives within you now. People need to see Jesus in you, they don’t just need to hear about it at a distance. So, how do we close the gap? Let me just give you a couple of suggestions. Here is the first one:

“Close the gap” with understanding and empathy.

Would you not agree these things are in really short supply in our world today? This whole idea of... Can I say it this way? Seek to understand before being understood? The most natural human response that all of us have is, “I want you to understand where I’m coming from.” And what that does is it creates a gap, it creates distance.

But if we could sort of listen more and talk less, we could empathize with where somebody is at. Oftentimes, the issue really isn’t the issue. There is some grief going on, some pain, some loneliness, some lament. Oftentimes it’s amazing how people will lower their defenses after they’ve been heard.

I love how author and speaker Berne Brown puts this. I don’t advocate everything she says and writes, but I do love this analogy where she talks about this pit. Have any of you ever seen this?

When someone falls into an emotional pit and they are just grieving over something or struggling with something. You come along and you see them in the pit, figuratively speaking. What we kind of do is pop our head down in that pit, “What are you doing down there?”

“I’m having a hard time. I’m really going through this. I’ve lost my job.” Or, “We can’t get pregnant. I’m just feeling so depressed right now.”

You’re like, “Man, I’m really sorry about that. It could be worse. At least you still have your house.” We’re trying to make them feel better, it’s coming from a good place.

She says that’s the equivalent of handing them a sandwich. “Here, you want a sandwich? Eat that PB&J and maybe you’ll feel better.” I don’t know about you, but there have been a whole

lot of years in my 21 years of marriage where I've given my wife so many sandwiches. She is sick of sandwiches.

And, she just says, "What you need to do is crawl down in the pit, sit next to them, and go, 'Yeah, that stinks. This is hard. I don't know what to say to you right now, but I'm really glad you just told me what you told me.'"

It's empathy. As Christ followers, one of the ways we close the gap is to empathize with those in what they are going through. When others don't think we care, when we fail to identify with what they are going through, automatically they feel shamed, belittled, judged, and dismissed. It always widens the gap.

Listen, followers of Jesus should be the model for how to do this well, even with people we don't agree with.

Here's the next application:

"Close the gap" by not being easily offended.

Would you not agree that right now we are perhaps more offended than ever? I think the reason why is that we are now experiencing a global pandemic which then triggered, or caused, a national lockdown, which triggered an economic meltdown. Your kids got sent home for e-learning as you tried to work from home.

That was followed by social unrest and riots. We are in the middle of an election year. All your vacation plans got cancelled. You are stuck at home, and spending way too much time reading all the crazy posts on social media. That's why we're so offended.

Can I just say that our shock absorbers are shot? We're under so much pressure and so much anxiety, it just takes the slightest thing and it triggers us. We get offended and lose it with others. When that happens, it ruins our witness and it widens the gap—especially in our social media profile—that says we are a follower of Jesus.

What happens when you get offended?

- You get angry...
- You jump to conclusions...
- You think the worst of someone else's intentions...

That's the equation. We develop this narrative in our mind where we want to be right more than we want to connect with others. We end up missing each other. This pops up in such easy ways. Can I just say we've got to keep an eye on this? Especially right now in the season that we are in. We don't mean to widen the gap, but we do.

I'll just give you an example from my life. On Tuesday I was working on this message on being gracious towards others. I leave the office at about 5:00 p.m., and on my way home I pop into Meijer to pick up a few things.

You know, Meijer has the baskets you can carry if you're only getting a couple of things, and then they have like the big carts if you're doing full-on grocery shopping, or they have the medium carts if you just need a few things.

I got the medium sized cart. I'm wheeling my way through. I get a few things, go up to the self-checkout, walk up, and pull the stuff out. It's only three bags worth of things. I pull it up and I didn't see a receipt come out.

I'm used to seeing it come out here [waist high]. I thought, "Maybe it didn't work." So, I grab the bags and turn to walk away. The lady working the self-checkout is standing right there. She looks at me and says, "Sir, do you need your receipt?"

I turned around and see she is pointing at it. I was like, "Oh, didn't see it. Yes, I do, thank you." So, I go to get it. I totally forgot about my cart. And she said, with a tone I might add, "And is that your cart?" It's all in the way she said cart.

I was like, "Oh yeah, actually it is." I go to get the receipt, and she goes, "Do you want to take your cart?" and there it was again. It just kind of rubbed me the wrong way. I didn't say anything. I didn't do anything. But I was just like, "Alright."

I was wearing a mask, so that helps. So, I grabbed the cart and I'm walking away. It just set me off. It just offended me. I'm walking out to the truck rehearsing, "What's her problem? She's judging me, that I'm the cart-leaver guy."

I'm walking out and I was like, "You know what? If I were her boss, I would tell her the customer is always right. Or, how about she uses this opportunity to serve someone?" Like, "I've got it. Have a great day."

I'm going through all this stuff in my head. "I'm going to go back in there and file a complaint," and I wasn't really, but it just made me feel better. I get into the truck and I'm sitting there and just in the silence, the Holy Spirit tapped on my shoulder. "Brockett, what's your problem? It's a cart. And you should have taken it away."

And then he just began to say, "You have no idea who she is. You have no idea what she is going through today. You didn't tell her off, way to go! But you didn't really encourage her any. You have no idea what she is facing at home. You have no idea, maybe the anxiety or the pressure she is feeling."

And I realized right then and there, "Why did I get so easily offended over something I could have turned into an opportunity to show her some genuine love, which she is probably not used to seeing in the checkout line at Meijer?" I don't know. Close the gap. I was so thankful I was wearing a mask, so that way she wouldn't recognize me. Right?

Proverbs chapter 19:11 says this. We're going to talk about this in a couple of weeks:

"Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense." (ESV)

Some of us need to print that verse out and set it above our computer screen, or tape it to our phone for every time we read a social media post we don't like or agree with. And to recognize that good sense makes me slow to anger.

Here, in a couple of weeks, as we regather on September 20, I'm going to take a break, a three-week break, from the Gospel of Luke, and we're going to jump into a message series largely based on that verse. We're going to walk through this together.

So, can I just ask you this today? Are you easily offended? Are you quick to anger? Are you blasting people in the comments on social media? If you are, are you convincing anyone?

And let me just answer that. "No, you're not, and you're possibly widening the gap between others and Jesus."

Here's the third thing:

“Close the gap” by being gracious and loving.

I had a mentor tell me when I was in college, “Aaron, never, ever forget this. We are saved by grace, and that ought to make us gracious.”

And when we are not gracious we have to ask ourselves, “What did we really experience on the day of our conversion.” Because if it’s grace, then that should be the automatic response.

In Colossians 4:5-6 it says this:

“Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone.”

Everyone, not just the people who agree with you, not just the people who see things the way you see it, or see the world the way you see it. He says, “May you be gracious so your response can be attractive to everyone you interact with.” Why would he say that? So that you can close the gap.

I love this cartoon. It made me chuckle last week when I saw it. There is a guy at heaven’s gate, getting checked in. I don’t think it’s going to go down like that, by the way. But he says, “You were a believer, yes, but you skipped the not being a jerk about it part.”

I’d just say, “Yes, I’ve been a jerk about it at times, and maybe you have too.” This is an opportunity for us to change course in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of an election year, to recognize that Jesus has called us to close the gap because the gap was closed for us because of his grace. Let’s just get real:

There is a gap between all of us and God.

You walk through Ephesians 2, and it explains it so concisely.

“Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins... But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!)”

We can put our hands together for that. So, Jesus closes the gap by his grace, and repentance is what triggers that grace. Repentance is this beautiful invitation for us to come to God as we are, to take off the mask, so to speak, and come to him and say, “This is me.”

What repentance is, “I’m not going to deny where I’ve gone wrong. I’m not going to make excuses for it. I’m going to actually own it.” And can I use this analogy? I used this one a few weeks ago—taking off all the baggage, take a load off and give it all to Jesus.

Can I use another analogy? It’s this idea of just tilling up the soil of your heart so that God can do a new work.

When Lindsay and I first got married, we moved into an 800 to 1,000 square-foot house that we rented. The previous tenants had really neglected the house. So, it needed a lot of work before we could move in.

I remember walking in, and it was absolutely filthy. We had to rip up the carpet, and I rented a power washer and power washed the kitchen cabinets. And the yard was in just as bad of

shape. Grass wasn't growing. I mean, there were stretches of dirt. It was just dry and hard. That soil was in really, really bad shape.

It was so bad that I couldn't just throw grass seed on it. I had to rent a tiller. And I had to till up that whole yard. The stuff that was embedded in the soil, not on the surface, but down deep—it was amazing what I was bringing up to the surface.

As I tilled up that soil I tilled up chicken wire. I tilled up tin cans and empty 2-liter bottles of Pepsi. I even, and I'm not exaggerating this, I tilled up a Lynyrd Skynyrd tee-shirt. That should tell you about the people who lived there before. I tilled all that stuff up. Then I put seed down. Then I put fertilizer down. Then I smoothed it out. Within a couple of years, we finally had grass.

Before you can get to this place where God can do a transformational work in your life, you've got to let him till up the soil of your heart. That's what repentance is. That's where you come to him and say, "God, I'm not going to fake it anymore. There's some junk that's not on the surface, it's embedded deep down, and by your Spirit I need you to till that stuff up."

Through Jesus, God accepts you. "I'm so thankful you finally would admit that. I love you and accept you right where you are. And even more than that, I love you too much to leave you right where you are. Let's do this heart work to till some stuff up."

And repentance is not just what you did on the day of your conversion, it's what you get invited to on a daily basis.

When I get into the truck on Tuesday in the Meijer parking lot, and I sat there for a minute, I had to repent. I said, "God, there is some junk in my heart. I don't even know how it got in there. I need you to till that stuff up."

So, today, I want to invite you to repent whether you are following Jesus or whether you are not, because we all need it. Right now, we need to let the Spirit of God close the gap, because maybe we've drifted this past week. Maybe we've drifted into anger. Maybe we've drifted into apathy. Maybe we've drifted into despair.

Today, I just want to look right into the camera. And if you are feeling a little like Levi, and you're at your tax collector booth, whatever that looks like, and you felt shamed and judged and wondered if you'd ever be accepted, maybe you identify with my great grandfather, Harry Bailey, and you've done some things that you're like, "I don't know if I'll ever recover from them," I want you to know you are loved. I want you to know that there is a God who has a life he has already pre-ordained for you to live. Today he is compassionately saying, "Hey, come home."

What I want to ask you to do, whether you are in the room or online. Maybe you're in your car, your living room, your backyard. Would you just close your eyes? Maybe you haven't prayed in a really long time. Can I just pray for you, and you can just accept this prayer as your own? Just agree with this prayer.

Lord God, I haven't prayed in a long time. If it really is true that you've closed the gap, would you close it for me today. I desperately want that kind of grace. I want that kind of love and acceptance, because I've tried everything else. Maybe it feels good for a little bit, but it doesn't last.

God, right now I'm angry, offended, irritated, and scared. I need what only you can give. If this is real, I want it. So, God, please till up the soil of my heart. I'm tired of faking it.

So, I just confess my sins. I admit to you who I am. This is authentically me, and there are some parts that are pretty ugly. If you would save me by your grace, I want that.

I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that you are my Savior. I want you to be Lord over every area of my life. Would you please come in and do a renewing work within me?

I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Can I just say this? If you prayed that prayer even with the weakest amount of faith, God heard that prayer. And we love you and celebrate you right now. If you prayed that prayer, would you text JESUS to 87221? Just pull out your phone right now and text JESUS to 87221. We want to follow up with you to celebrate you, pray with you, and help guide you through your next steps in your spiritual journey.

Oh man, if there is anything about a God who closes the gap in our lives the response is to sing, the response is to worship, the response is to be joyful.