

COMPASSION SUNDAY: IT BEGINS WITH A CHILD...



SERMON: **GATE CRASHERS**

By Greg Nettle, Senior Pastor, Rivertree Christian Church

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It's an absolute pleasure and privilege to be with you all this morning. I was very excited, and I told my wife it will be good to be in a more subtly warm climate than northern Ohio.

I fly a great deal, I travel quite a lot, and I added up my flights at the end of the year last year. I had flown 56 times. I know that many of you fly much more than that because of your job with Compassion and some of you less, but because I fly so much I like to know what is going on with the flights and the aeronautic world. We happen to have an air-traffic controller who is part of our family at RiverTree, and we have some pilots, and we actually have someone who oversees the airport near where we live.

So, I sat down with him and said, "So, tell me some things that are going on. Like those yellow masks that come down — do those really work and would they really do anything?" He said, "No, they are actually just to muffle the screams." That was comforting. And the brochures that are in the pockets — you know they always tell you to read those before you take off, and most of us don't do that. My wife does, because she is an extreme rule-keeper for every time. I don't look at them — there are no words printed on them. I don't know if you've noticed that. There are just pictures for all of us to understand. I look at them and think, "It doesn't make sense to me that you would put your head between your legs during a crash," and he said, "Well, that is to kiss your butt goodbye."

Why We Do What We Do

I don't know if you have noticed or not, but many airlines are now giving away free headphones. You used to have to buy them, and now they are giving them away free and I discovered why. USA Today ran this article that said many commercial airlines are now being equipped with anti-terrorist missiles. I don't know if you saw that or not, but this is truth. It is so shoulder-launched

NOTES

missiles can be intercepted in the air. So when I asked what is the deal with the headphones, he said those are to muffle the sounds of the missiles being launched off the jet. So we fly, and we pray and we shed tears. Many of us are away from our families, and we ask the question, “Why do we do what we do?” What makes us continue day in and day out?

I know that you are all intimately and painfully aware of the fact that 30,000 children around the world die from poverty or poverty-related preventable diseases every 24 hours. That’s why we do what we do. So, I happen to have 30,000 BBs in these two pitchers just as a reminder of what happens every 24 hours. And that’s what keeps me getting on flights. It’s why we do what we do. It’s why we link arms and we partner together.

The Reality of ‘Hell’

I want to talk to you this morning about two things: hell and the Church. As a local pastor of a church, I am very aware that those two words go together occasionally. But today I don’t want to talk about those two words in that light. I want to talk with you first about hell. Some people don’t even believe in hell today.

A young girl came home from her date with a young man that she had been dating for quite a while, and she was forlorn, so her mom asked her what was going on. She said, “Mom, I am very sad. Jeff asked me to marry him tonight,” Her mom said, “Well, what’s the problem?” And she said, “Mom, Jeff told me that he is an atheist and that he does not even believe in hell.” And her mom said, “Honey, marry him anyhow, and I am sure that between the two of us we can prove to him that he is wrong and that there is a hell.”

Some of you understand that, don’t you? How many of you have said at one point or another, “My life is a living hell”? How many of you have heard someone say that? Statistically, with all of those here and those watching around the world, someone could say that right now — that your life is a living hell.

So, let’s talk about hell. It’s kind of interesting, the word “hell” doesn’t even occur in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word “Sheol” does, and it means “grave.” The word “hell” isn’t introduced to us until the New Testament. Specifically, Jesus uses the word “Gehenna,” and He only uses it 12 times. And when Jesus uses the word “Gehenna,” He doesn’t typically speak about hell.

NOTES

It is some place in the afterlife, some place in the future. He typically talks about Gehenna as something that exists right now, on this Earth, in this place, in this time.

Horrific Child Sacrifice

When Jesus talked about hell, He was actually talking about a specific place that people would know. It's a real place in real time. So why did the valley of Hinnom end up being referred to and known as "hell"? Well, we have to go back to the Old Testament to understand that there was a king that arose, and his name was Josiah. He brought about a lot of reform to the land, and I want to read to you about it in 2 Kings 23:10. The Old Testament says the king defiled the altar in the valley of Hinnom so no one could ever use it again to sacrifice sons and daughters in the fire as an offering to the god Molech. So Josiah comes in and he tears down this altar that had been used in the valley of Hinnom to sacrifice sons and daughters.

Molech was a pagan god who was worshiped years and years ago. And as horrific as this seems to us, people who were very devout followers of this pagan god proved their loyalty to Molech, and that if they truly honored him would be asked to bring their firstborn child to the valley of Hinnom, where that child would be burned alive and sacrificed on the altar. So, the valley of Hinnom was a horrific place of child sacrifice. This was a place that good Jews would avoid; they didn't go to their Sunday picnic at the valley of Hinnom, and they stayed away from it.

Eventually, the valley began to be used as the town dump. It was the place where the corpses of executed criminals would be tossed and discarded. Now, if you have a big pile of trash starting to build up, how do you reduce it? They didn't have trash compactors back then, so how do they reduce the size of the trash pile? They burn it — and pretty soon, because the piles were so large, the fires would burn night and day.

Children Still Suffering

Now, when I was growing up and it was still legal back then, we had a burn barrel in our back yard. Some of you might have had those as well. And it was a big deal once that burn barrel had burned all the way down. If I had been good all week long, for my dad to take me with him to the town dump was a big deal. We didn't have much to do in our small town. And eventually, this

NOTES

dump, this “Gehenna,” would be a smoldering fire day in and day out, night in and night out. There were dogs in this dump, and they weren’t nice pets like we have today. They were wild, ravenous beings that would fight over the scraps in the dump. You could hear their high-pitched whining as they fought one another, and you can imagine that as they clashed, you would hear the gnashing of teeth.

So, pretty soon you would have a fire that never went out, night or day, and where you would hear the whining, weeping and gnashing of teeth. Does that sound familiar? Gehenna was a real, physical place where things that had lost their value and their worth would be tossed. Now again, Jesus used the word “Gehenna” in Matthew, Mark and Luke 12 times, and every time Jesus talked about it, He was referring to a real place in a real time that real people would understand. At times when Jesus would speak of Gehenna, just like you are sitting now, people sitting there could smell the stench of the fires as the junk burned.

How many of you have traveled to a place where children are tossed aside? Where they are devalued, where they are not considered of great worth, where they are even sacrificed to the pagan gods of the age. Places where if you were to hear the word “Gehenna,” you would understand exactly what Jesus was talking about. Places where in fact you have smelled the stench in your own nostrils. When Jesus was talking about hell most often, He was talking about places just like that — places that exist like that right here and right now on this Earth.

Becoming a Gate-Crasher

So, let’s move away from talking about hell right now, and let’s talk about the church for just a couple of moments. In Matthew 16:18, a very well-known verse, Jesus said, “I will build my Church and not even the gates of hell will stand against it.” Now the Church that Jesus talks about as assaulting the gates of hell is not some bunch of passive, cloistered, self-righteous, prophecy-reading pansies. The Church that Jesus is talking about is composed of a bunch of messed-up sinners like us who understand God’s grace and the importance of linking arms and storming the Gehennas of the world.

So, do you know what that makes us as the Church? That makes us gate-crashers. We are committed literally to crashing the very gates of hell and

NOTES

extinguishing the fires of Gehenna that exist right here and right now that Jesus is talking about. And it is one of the many, many things that I love about Compassion International. It's one of the reasons that we as the local church choose to partner with you, because we watched your commitment to working with the local church and working in countries in the most desperate parts of the world to extinguish the fires of Gehenna of children who have been cast aside. I am also painfully aware to flip to the other side of the apathy that we have exhibited as the Church in many parts of North America when it comes to caring for kids on the margins. I assume that responsibility beginning with myself.

But I am here today to encourage you, because I believe that there is a great awakening that we are seeing in many countries around the world in the Church, but specifically in North America. God's spirit is on the move in the lives of leaders of the Church, and God is choosing to use each of you as part of Compassion International to ignite that movement that is happening within us.

Persistence Pays Off

About six years ago, a man named Brent Bercher approached our church in RiverTree. Brent was an Advocate that was trained by you for Compassion International. He asked if we could do a Compassion International weekend at RiverTree, and of course I told him no. He asked me again and again and again, and I told him no, no, no. Now, I had very valid reasons. I didn't know that much about Compassion International, and for me to stand up in front of our church and endorse an organization, telling people to invest their money into an organization that I didn't know much about — I wasn't willing to do that. And secondly, to be very honest, probably the more predominant reason was that I didn't want funds drained out of our cash flow at RiverTree and have people start sending their money to Compassion International to care for kids around the world.

And finally, after a couple of years of nagging, Brent was allowed to speak to the one adult fellowship Sunday school class that we had left at RiverTree. We had moved to Thrive groups and Home groups, and out of that weekend about 20 sponsorships ensued. Brent continued to nag me, and God continued to work in my heart and in the hearts of the leaders of RiverTree. So, we began to heavily research Compassion International. I made my first trip to Ecuador with Greg Birgy, and I discovered the life-changing and transformation occurring

NOTES

because of the ministry of Compassion, right here and right now and for all of eternity. As we examined the finances, it became very clear that it was like no other organization in the world that we could discover had the financial credibility and integrity that Compassion has sustained over the years.

Investing in the Kingdom

So, thank you for your integrity personally as you handle finances globally. I cannot begin to tell you the importance of maintaining that integrity so that church leaders like me can stand in front of the church today and say, “We’ve checked it out, and this is a place you can trust and this is a place that is good for an eternal kingdom investment.”

So, God began the work of molding the Church and my life at a very personal level, and two years later we had our very first Compassion International weekend. There were 400 children sponsored that weekend, and that was very fun. We began to take trips to Ecuador, Peru and Africa and encourage people to go meet their children and go see the work of fires being extinguished firsthand. Here is what we discovered along the way: The more generous we are as the church, being mindful of the things of God, the more generous God is with us. The more generous we are as individuals, being mindful of the things of God, the more generous God is with us as individuals.

I believe with all of my heart that God is looking for churches today that will take kingdom resources that He entrusts to them and use their leverage to move others toward him and places like Compassion and care for people on the margins of society. When He finds those churches, it is a biblical principle: He will entrust those places with more kingdom resources as we’re faithful. And if God can find individuals who will take those kingdom resources and not use them for their own benefits and pleasures, but rather be a funnel to the people who are on God’s heart, He will entrust us with more. He is looking for gate-crashers, and the Church in America is awakening.

Never Too Young to Get It

A few months ago, I was reading the headlines in our local Sunday newspaper and came across this one: “Kids Collect Stuffed Animals to Send Overseas.” I thought it was a cool idea. Nearly 1,500 stuffed animals were collected. Our daughter Tabitha turned 9 years old this past year. She wanted to have a big gymnastics birthday party like her friend had had. I am not big on spending

NOTES

money on birthday parties every year, and yet that is what she wanted, but I said we were not going to do that. And so I went to this fund-raiser golf outing for the children's ministry, and after the golf outing there was an opportunity to be a part of raising funds. One of the prizes was an outing for 25 kids at the local gymnastics place where she wanted to have her party. It included everything, and yes I bought it. It was a good cause.

I talked to my wife about it, and I said the biggest problem with the big birthday party is that she will get presents from me and you and grandparents, and get at least 25 things that she doesn't need. So instead, what if we asked her friends to bring cash donations to the little girl that we sponsor through Compassion International? We thought that was a great idea, but how would we sell this to our 9-year-old? I sat her down and said here is what we want to do: "Mom and Dad will still get you birthday presents, but what if we ask your 25 friends to bring donations instead?" And Tabitha, without a blink of an eye, said, "I like it." So with the money we sent, our sponsored child was able to buy new bunk beds for the whole family instead of them all sharing a bed like they had before. Do you know what my little 9-year-old Tabitha is becoming? A gate-crasher.

Extinguishing More Fires

This journey has become very personal to me because of you. This past year, I made three trips to Ecuador, meeting more than 40 high-impact leaders. The fires could be extinguished through partnerships with Compassion International. The leaders returned to their churches with the stench of Gehenna in their nostrils and said we have to put out the fires. My wife, Julie, and I traveled to Quito this fall with all of our church elders and spouses. We spent time with our little girl who we sponsor. She is now 11 years old and doing wonderfully. She shared with us that she would like to be a doctor someday. The fires are being extinguished for her.

Then the men from our church worked on housing projects due to the devastation of recent earthquakes in the Compassion projects. At 70, do you know what my dad is? A gate-crasher. This past fall, we held our third Compassion weekend, and more than 1,000 children have been sponsored. We are learning to be gate-crashers. My wife and I recently received our license to be foster parents and have a girl coming this weekend. We did that because there are 17,000 children in Ohio alone who intimately know the

NOTES

smell of Gehenna. If we don't crash those gates for them, who will? You see how personal this is? Much of it began because there was a man named Brent Bercher who Compassion trained as an Advocate volunteer who leads so many of us to partner with you.

My purpose here today is not to elevate the Church, but to help you understand that there is this amazing awakening going on in the Church in North America. I believe that with all of my heart, and we desperately need you all. You are very rapidly approaching 1 million child sponsors, and that is a "Yeah, God!" But please, can I challenge you to begin to imagine the sponsoring of 10 million children? I know that change and growth are challenging. But what are we? We're gate-crashers, and if not us, then who?