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BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR REACHING SPECIAL
NEEDS FAMILIES THROUGH SUMMIT BAPTIST
CHURCH IN WIGGINS, COLORADO

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BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR REACHING SPECIAL
NEEDS FAMILIES THROUGH SUMMIT BAPTIST
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For the glory of God

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PREFACE

This project is dedicated to my family: my wife, Rebecca, who is my rock in ministry and in life, and my two typical sons, Nehemiah and Samuel. Most of all, this project is dedicated to my loving son, Ezekiel, who has gone through more than I can imagine during his life and still is happy and strong. He is a blessing in my life.

Jeffery D. Paschall

Wiggins, Colorado

December 2022

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The aim of a pastor is to preach the Word of God in such a way as to move the listeners to act upon what Scripture is teaching them. For years preachers have taught about the mission fields that are ripe for Christians to share their faith with the communities around them. However, when we preach of Christ healing the blind, deaf or lame, many pastor and Christians overlook the aspect of Christ pursuing the disabled individual, just as he would anyone else. Although Christ healed them, he saw them as important and significant to his kingdom and displayed this behavior over and over again throughout his life. Christ fed five thousand, he turned water into wine, and he healed the sick and disabled, he believed that his grace was for all of us and yet the American church tends to overlook special needs and their families as a lost people group. Although not intentional, many churches pay little to no attention to special need individuals and their families for a variety of reasons. For this reason, Summit Baptist Church has come to learn through preaching how they can equip themselves to understand the need to reach special needs families for the furthering of God's kingdom, to save the lost, mature the faithful and to glorify God.

Context

Ministry Context

My experience comes in two capacities. Currently, I am the Senior Pastor at Summit Baptist Church in Wiggins, Colorado. Previously, I served with one of my very good friends, who is pastor of Evergreen Bible Church (EBC) in Williamstown, West Virginia were both my wife and I served as advisers to a special needs program.

Although my primary focus is on Summit in Wiggins, Colorado, knowing the context of EBC is incredibly important because it provides an insight to different challenges churches will face when creating a special needs ministry. From this experience I gained a vast knowledge in which I will be able to implement changes at Summit.

Advisory Role Context

The members of EBC are absolutely wonderful people that love each other and desire God's glory. They see people's needs within the church and they desire to help and work diligently to meet those needs and so it appeared that they were ready for such a ministry. The area rests in what is known as the Mid-Ohio Valley which includes both Washington County, Ohio, and Wood County, West Virginia, and it contains around 200,000 residents and nearly 10 percent of the population has a disability or special needs.¹ With the desire of the people at EBC and the need in the Mid-Ohio Valley it became clear that they needed to pursue a strong special needs ministry. As an adviser I had the unique perspective of being a special needs parent and a pastor, which has given me insights on limitations on both sides of the argument.

Primary Context

At the same time as the Senior Pastor at Summit I desired a special needs program in our area as well. Wiggins, Colorado, is a smaller community however it still has its own need for a program to accommodate those that have special needs. The members at Summit have a care and love for others and want the Word of God to be accessible to everyone. Therefore, they have created a new ministry titled "The Church Has Left The Building" to reach the community. Wiggins and the surrounding area have close to 30,000 and just over 2,500 individuals with some type of special need or

¹ United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Wood County, West Virginia," accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/woodcountywestvirginia>.

disability.² The needs grow even stronger considering the explosive growth of Denver Metro Area in Colorado which is estimated to be over 2.9 million people with an approximant 224,000 individuals with special needs or disabilities.³ This growth is encroaching the outlying cities such as Wiggins which is approximately forty minutes outside of the Denver Metro Area. A local housing developer reports, “It is estimated that Wiggins will have one hundred additional houses built by the end of the year to supply the current demand for housing.”⁴ With several new housing developments expected over the next several years, some developers and city leaders expect Wiggins to triple in size over the next five to ten years.⁵ With this increase in growth, both in the Denver Metro area and Morgan County, it is vital to formulate and create a special needs ministry amid the growth projections instead of responding to the growth after it occurs. The type of action taken now will determine the strength and longevity of the ministry moving forward.

I had the opportunity to meet with city leaders of Wiggins. They all agree that working together toward a more wholesome community is beneficial to the city, Summit Baptist Church, and special needs families. A special needs ministry would move the community in a positive direction in regard to helping these families. Therefore, as I approach the subject of special needs ministries with community leaders, they all became interested in helping make this a success and provide these families an opportunity to be a bigger part of the community. With the church and the community working together, all parents of special needs children have the opportunity to have relationships outside of their immediate families; something difficult for them. With a ministry like this, it is

² United States Census Bureau, “Quick Facts: Morgan County, Colorado,” accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/morgancountycolorado>.

³ United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: Denver County, Colorado,” accessed February 26, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/denvercountycolorado>.

⁴ Russell Smith, interview with author, September 3, 2020.

⁵ Smith, interview.

incredibly important to have the support from the secular community, which greatly increases the chances of success. Additionally, with the church and the community working together, the special needs community in the area will have greater access and connection to the church *and* the community.

Culture Changing

Summit is certainly in the midst of a culture change as their previous pastor and staff did not seek to reach the community and now an emphasis has been placed on caring for the lost and the community, which has become a strength going forward in creating a special needs ministry. Members have expressed the willingness and desire to step out into a new opportunity and witness to a people group that frankly never have been intentionally reached by the church. Summit has increased their ministries recently from zero to little evangelism and discipleship ministries to a dedication to these ministries. These church members have a desire that all come to the Lord and that the church can make a mark on the community. This unfortunately was not the case for many years, Summit did not witness to the community or work toward a strong relationship with the lost and sadly they fell into a philosophy of “we are happy where we are” mindset.⁶ Between 2006 and 2018 the church lost 68 percent of their membership, and based on the reviews of both the Annual Church Profile and Business Meeting Notes during that same period the church leaders were more concerned with internal church ministries rather than the Great Commission and evangelism.⁷ With some key leaders leaving and new deacons appointed the church has been working toward a culture shift, along with the new leaders comes their families and several of these families have had intimate experience with special needs in their own households. This has created the perfect opportunity to create and take the steps necessary to a ministry for Special Needs

⁶ Annual Church Profile 2006-2018. This is a document on file at SNF.

⁷ Business Meeting Notes 2006-2019. This is a document on file at SNF.

Families (SNF). Summit is in the process of taking the next steps in ministry and provide a safe and exciting environment for all SNF.

Another strength is the position the church is in financially and the facilities they built. Fifteen years ago, Summit made the decision that they were going to anticipate this growth that was coming so they started a new building fund as their current sanctuary was becoming run-down and financially costly to maintain. Summit has now completed the new building which will accommodate the future growth in the area. This has created the space needed to serve SNF and have a future special needs ministry.

Problematic Habits

Unfortunately, Summit, like many churches have some significant weaknesses associated with past behavior and practices. One glaring concern comes with the type of ministry that special needs requires, which is one of longevity. A special needs child will become a special needs adult; a special needs adult will become a special needs elderly person. If the ministry is to be successful, then it requires years and years of continuous effort. Moreover, the range in age from newborn to ninety plus creates a wide range of volunteers to understand the difference not only between special needs but between age groups. SNF need to know that a church is going to stay connected with them throughout their journey with special needs, once this connection is made the families are much more likely to trust and stay engaged with the church. It is important to note that SNF have been abandoned by so many people in their lives because of special needs circumstances.⁸ With this abandonment they often are hesitant to commit to a certain organization or church. Therefore, recognizing this abandonment issue is an important key for the church to understand. A church must create a strong culture of commitment and love toward these families to overcome such obstacles.

⁸ Ben Ours and Crystal Ours, interview with author, March 15, 2021.

Rationale

To understand the rationale of this project it is important to understand what is meant by the term “special needs.” This definition is incredibly difficult to define, in fact there cannot be a definite line drawn that completely establishes all necessary special needs. Special needs in essence is someone that requires special help (physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive/mental) above that of a typically healthy individual. In an effort to create a reproducible ministry, it is important to show the rationale for the nation as a whole, state of Colorado, Morgan County and Summit Baptist Church itself. It should be noted that the information from federal and state websites present the information in “per capita” format.

As a Nation

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 25.6 percent of adults suffer with some type of disability, and 12.9 percent have difficulty walking and 11.4 percent have serious cognition issues.⁹ This information points to the fact that nearly twenty-one million families in the United States have at least one family member with a special need or disability.¹⁰ The average size of a family in the United States is 3.7 people, therefore, close to sixty-three million people are directly affected by special needs. However, this is most likely a conservative estimation because there are many adults that do not get diagnosed for a variety of factors: a diagnosis would cost them their jobs, specific stigmas associated with diagnosis, and the like. The nation as a whole is in desperate need to address disabilities and special needs moving forward, however, the church should be a major part of this change.

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Disability & Health U.S. State Profile Data for Colorado (Adults 18+ Years of Age),” last modified May 18, 2022, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/impacts/colorado.html>.

¹⁰ United States Census Bureau, “Disability and American Families: 2000,” July 2005, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2005/dec/censr-23.pdf>.

State/County

Colorado has an overall lower rate of individuals with disabilities and special needs to the national average at 21.1 percent.¹¹ Children in Colorado show a slightly lower percentage for students with disabilities than the national average according to the Colorado Department of Education.¹² Wiggins is located in Morgan County and it has a rate of special needs/disabled individuals at 12 percent of the population.¹³ Effectively, Morgan County is in the medium range for Colorado counties, however, with the aforementioned growth Morgan County is experiencing it will not be long before the disability/special need community increases as well.

Inside the Church

There is a statistical consistency between the national averages for special needs/disabilities and the state and county averages. This should lead us to expect similar consistency within the church, but this simply is not the case. Summit has about seventy-five members and within those members there are only three families that have acknowledged they have special needs. We can see that statistically Summit has 2.4 percent special needs inside the church, which is a drastic drop from the national average of 25.6 percent and the state average of 21 percent. The county has over 3,200 disabled and special need individuals. With the population growth looming it is essential to get ahead of the growth and Summit is doing just that. With the addition of a new building which has the ability to accommodate disabled and special needs individuals the timing could not be more perfect.

¹¹ CDC, "Disability & Health U.S. State Profile Data for Colorado."

¹² Colorado Department of Education, "Colorado Child, Count/Ed. Environment 2017-2018 (Excel)," State of Colorado Special Education Data, accessed February 26, 2020, https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/sped_data.

¹³ United States Census Bureau "Quick Facts: Morgan County, Colorado."

To be thorough and to make sure that Summit was not an anomaly, I looked at another church I am familiar with, EBC. They have a membership around three hundred and they have about twenty-five special needs family/individuals in their church.¹⁴ That again is drastically below national average where EBC is at 8.3 percent which can be explained by the fact that their special needs ministry is in its infancy stages (three years). This information is the reason that the fear of having special needs in your church must be addressed, because the special need mission field is prime and ready to be reached. The church is a place that is deep in the trenches of life and that includes people that have undesirable backgrounds, sinful tendencies, special needs, and/or disabilities. The church must speak for those that have little to no voice, as Proverbs 31:8-9 states, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and *needy*” (emphasis added).¹⁵

It is imperative that the church remove the emotional fears toward SNF and learn to love them as they would anyone else who walks through the door. SNF and individuals are desperate to hear the gospel and to have the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Thus, it is a tragedy that churches do not minister to them more frequently. We cannot miss this opportunity to share the love of Christ in a much-needed mission field. As Jesus told the parable of the banquet in Luke 14, he states, “but when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” The church cannot neglect this community any longer for it is in them that the church will find great blessings beyond what we can imagine.

¹⁴ Crystal Ours, interview with author, February 25, 2021.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to establish biblical foundations for special needs individuals and families in the church and create a reproducible format for this ministry so other local churches can begin to reach their special needs community.

Goals

The ability to create a strong biblically sound special needs program at Summit will include four particular goals. These goals were designed to establish the needs of the special needs community and use Scripture as the foundation to meet these needs.

1. The first goal was to assess SNF in our community and their needs.
2. The second goal was to assess how local churches are interacting with or ministering to SNF and are they actively seeking them as a lost people group.
3. The third goal was to develop a sermon series designed to inspire members of Summit Baptist Church and the community to reach the SNF in our community for the glory of God.
4. The fourth goal was to develop a Ministry Plan using the first two goals to address the spiritual and physical needs of special needs families from a biblical perspective.

Upon completion of these goals Summit has established an understanding of the needs that the special needs community has and a direction on how to meet these needs through biblical understandings. The church has been able to begin to lay the groundwork for a strong special needs program moving forward.

Research Methodology

Four goals guide the implementation of a reproducible special needs program at Summit Baptist Church.

The first goal was to assess SNF in the community and their needs. The assessment of the SNF and their needs was accomplished through a *Special Needs Family Survey* (SNFS; see appendix 1). The survey consists of three sections. First, the survey established the SNF church background and current church involvement. The background portion of the survey was designed to assess the background of the SNF and

individual with special needs. Second, the church involvement section was designed to assess the family's current needs and involvement with the local church and where the church might be able to reach them more effectively. The third section was designed to assess the families overall desire to be involved with a local church and at what level of involvement. The goal was considered successfully met when fifty families who have a minimum of one family member with special needs complete the SNF survey and the inventory has been analyzed, yielding a clearer picture of the needs of SNF within the church.

The second goal was to assess local churches abilities and desire to reach the special needs community. The assessment of the local churches was accomplished through a *Church Special Needs Family Assessment (CSNFA)*; see appendix 2). The survey consist of three sections: church background, church engagement and church's theology toward special needs, current special needs involvement, and future outreach to the special needs community. The first portion of the survey was designed to assess the current involvement that the local church has with the special needs community. The second section of the survey, church engagement was designed to assess the local churches level of engagement with the special needs community. The third section of the survey, church theology was designed to assess the local churches theology behind a special needs ministry. This goal was considered successfully met when twenty local churches complete the *Church Special Needs Family Assessment*, and the inventory has been analyzed yielding a clearer picture of the engagement that churches are making toward SNF.

The third goal was to design a sermon series meant to clearly show the biblical foundations for reaching the special needs community and creating a ministry to accommodate their needs both spiritually and physically. This goal was measure by the pastor, deacons at Summit and a panel of experts who use a *Sermon Series Evaluation Rubric* to evaluate the biblical foundations, clarity, and relevance of the Sermon Series

(see appendix 3). This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators meet or exceed the sufficiency level.

The fourth goal was to design a Ministry Plan using the information obtained from the first two goals to address the spiritual and physical needs of SNF from a biblical perspective. This goal was measured by a panel of experts consisting of a Deacon, two special needs families and the pastor who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical fidelity of these needs. This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the *Ministry Plan Rubric* evaluation indicators meet or exceed the sufficiency level (see appendix 8).

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms was be used in the ministry project:

Special needs (disability). The American with Disabilities Act (ADA; 1990) defines a *disability*—what I take to be synonymous with *special needs*—as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.”¹⁶

There are three limitations that apply to this project. First, it was difficult to expect the types of disability or special need that responds to the survey. When this occurred the types of needs was similar and not a real representation of the large scope of needs that special needs families need from a church. To mitigate this limitation, multiple organizations and families with different diagnoses received the survey. Second, there was no controlling the number of surveys that are returned from both the special needs community and from local churches. To mitigate this limitation, a larger number of surveys were sent out to accommodate for a low return rate. For the purpose of this

¹⁶ United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, “Americans with Disabilities Act (1990),” accessed November 21, 2020, https://www.ada.gov/ada_intro.htm.

project five times the number of surveys were sent out to ensure the number surveys returned would eclipse the goals requirements to achieve the maximum return potential.

There was only one delimitation that applied to this project. This delimitation is based on the needs that came in from the special needs community. Summit has limited resources (e.g., financial, physical) and the church cannot meet every possible need that came in.

Conclusion

Special needs individuals and their families are a growing population that are in desperate need of the gospel. The church has the responsibility to make every effort to reach SNF and provide them a safe environment for their loved one with special needs. This project reached out to the special needs community and found the reason they are not seeking church engagement. Additionally, this project found why churches are not reaching these families. Finally, I created biblical foundations for reaching SNF and making it so that other churches can reproduce this ministry within their own church.

The remainder of this project will detail four different areas of this project. Chapter 2 details Christ's ministry with the disabled and a scriptural basis for developing a special needs ministry. Chapter 3 outlines the different obstacles that a church faces when creating a special needs ministry. Chapter 4 provides the process that was taken in gathering surveys and creating the sermon series and ministry plan. Chapter 5 concludes with a proper evaluation of all the data gather and the success of the project as a whole.

CHAPTER 2

THE SCRIPTURES PRESENT ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES FOR SHOWING GRACE TO THE SPECIAL NEEDS COMMUNITY

The thesis of this chapter is six passages from both the Old Testament and the New Testament reveals the mindset and the will of God as it pertains to special needs. The passages will be addressed in no particular order because God has ordered us to love one another throughout Scripture (John 13:34; 1 Pet 4:8).

The Church Is Showing Grace by Following God’s Greatest Command (Matt 22:34-40)

During the ministry of Jesus Christ, he had many Pharisees attempt to challenge him on the Law. Matthew 22 contains a series of events where the Pharisees attempt to trick Jesus into saying something that would cause him to incriminate himself. In one of these events the Pharisees sent a lawyer to challenge Christ about which of the commandments is the greatest. When the lawyer approached Jesus, the air of ignorance seems to roll off the page as one reads his questions. However, when the lawyer who was “an expert of the law” asked a question, it was completely in line with the intra-Jewish debate on how to rank or summarize all of the scriptural commandments.¹ His question seemed innocent enough: “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (Matt 22:36).

However, the idea here seemed to indicate that the open-ended question would certainly cause Jesus to make claims that would incriminate himself. Jesus responds to

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 334.

him in a clear and direct way, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on to these two commandments” (Matt 22:37). Jesus, without a single parable or illustration, answers the lawyer by first quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 for the greatest commandment and Leviticus 19:18 for the second commandment that is like the first. The audience listening to Jesus would immediately understand and even agreed with his statement. Simply put, Jesus wanted to ensure there was a dual understanding of the love commands in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament being quoted in the New Testament merits a deep look into all three Scripture passages (Matt 22:37; Deut 6; Lev 19) to gain a full meaning of what Jesus was saying when he answered this simple question. However, his response raises three major questions that should be addressed: (1) Why did Jesus answer two commandments when clearly the expert in law was looking for one? (2) If Christ is calling these two commandments the greatest of all the commandments, how does the rest of the New Testament treat these commandments? (3) Since verse 40 states that “on these two commandments depend on all the Law and the Prophets,” what is Christ saying regarding these two commandments? These answers should be uncovered during the exegesis of the passages themselves and give us a full understanding and impact of Christ’s words in Matthew 22. Christ’s usage of the Old Testament was ultimately the most graceful and meaningful application of both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 in both Old Testament context and the New Testament context alike, giving Christians today a clear path of living a godly life.

Examining the Old Testament Passages

To understand and unpack Matthew 22:37-40 we must first examine the verses in which Jesus was quoting, because these verses unlock the full power of what it truly

means to follow these two commandments. One of the keys to understand the fullness of Matthew 22:37-40 is through the Jewish understanding of both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. While Deuteronomy 6:5 is a large part of Jews tradition even today as it is recited as the part of the Shema every morning and evening.² Leviticus 19:18 on the other hand is an extension of Exodus and a further and deeper unpacking of the relationship between God and mankind. Both of these passages would be well-known to the Israelites and particularly the Pharisees, through the Mosaic law; therefore, it can be determined that Jesus's response to the question laid out by the lawyer would most certainly be recognizable and have a deep meaning to the audience. Realizing how Jesus used these commands and how these commands were originally intended is incredibly important.

Following the command found in Deuteronomy, Jesus continues to answer the lawyer by saying "love your neighbor as yourself." But Jesus precedes this command by saying that loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind is the first and greatest commandment and the second "is like it." To compare loving God and loving one's neighbor is difficult, but Jesus had a clear understanding of love; that everything flows from the first command and like the first commandment Christians are to love our neighbors in the same way. Love is a mark of a believer (1 John), but some debate whether this passage says we are to love other believer's or love the needy and poor. Jesus details what it actually means to love in Matthew 5:43-48:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

² Earl S. Kalland, *Deuteronomy*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, *Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 64.

Loving your neighbor was never designed for someone to love a particular group of people, instead it was designed to include everyone. This concept is difficult for many to believe because people are sinners and they do things that many times are unlovable, but the pure concept of loving God gives us a perspective that as sinners, everyone is unlovable and yet God has loved us.

Jesus's Usage of Deuteronomy and Leviticus Passages (Matt 22:34-40)

The question that is asked by the lawyer is a very important one, because it provides us with the answer to unlock so much of our understandings in Scripture. The Pharisees continued to ask questions trying to have Jesus incriminate himself, but it is this one question that opens our eyes to the source of all the law and love. First, the lawyer asked in verse 36 for what is the greatest commandment. Jesus gives him these two commandments in verse 40. This is significant because Christ recognized that there is a source of all the commandments and “all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” First, we must “love the Lord your God” which implies that God is in fact the God you are worshipping, it exemplifies the spirit of the first commandment “you shall have no gods before me.”³ This first commandment is what binds a believer in God to him and to him alone. Loving the Lord our God means he is our Creator, Ruler, and the One Christians serve. Jesus continues, “With all our heart, and all your soul and all your mind” and this is where there is a difference between Deuteronomy 6:5 where it ends with strength, instead of mind here in Matthew 22:37. Most theologians agree that this implication of heart, soul, and mind like Deuteronomy heart, soul, and strength point to the entirety of a person and to a wholehearted devotion to God with every aspect of a person's being. Simply put, there is no angle in which to look at a person that would be

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on The Whole Bible Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 1376.

void of worshipping God, because it is this type of love for God that results in total obedience to His will and all of His commandments. There is a clear observation here that New Testament authors cited Old Testament passages in a variety of ways and it appears that “their concern was not with the letter of the cited passage but with its intent, its fundamental message.”⁴ This seems to clearly be the case here, the fundamental message of the text is that a person must commit their devotion to God with everything they are and that is the only way in which you can show love to the Lord your God.

Deut 6:5

The Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5:6-21 exemplifies the covenant relationship between God, both in his nature, character and the responsibility that Israel has toward the one true God.⁵ In essence, all of God’s people must be compliant to the understanding of God and take the necessary action toward God that displays covenant obedience. This is especially true considering the backdrop of the Decalogue, and in particular Deuteronomy 5:7, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Deuteronomy 6:5 is the responsibility of God’s people (Israel) if in fact God is the only God to the Israelites then they shall “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The beginning of verse four “to hear” is equivalent “to obey” especially when it falls under the context of covenant passages such as this one.⁶

Deuteronomy 6:5 is in essence a confession of God’s uniqueness and oneness of the Lord not simply at an individual level but to a nation that is to act in an obedient manner toward their God. The command here is structured in such a way that, although it is a covenant, it is an obedience of love. Essentially, this says, that to obey God is to love

⁴ Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 166.

⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary, vol. 4 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 162.

⁶ Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 162.

God with every aspect of your physical, emotional, and spiritual being. The covenant itself is not one-sided by any means, as Deuteronomy 5:10 states, “showing love to a thousand of those who love me and keep my commandments.” God once again has chosen to demonstrate his love to everyone, even those, generations that have chosen to hate God and yet this command is explicit that nothing is an acceptable expression of love other than a full complete surrender to love in one’s entirety. In this respect, love is not an emotional or a sensual connection but rather it is the nature of an obligation to follow the law. Many SNF that attend church on a regular basis are exemplifying this desire to love God. They work diligently to get their child ready to attend church, knowing it will be met with struggles and issues along the way. But it is by the grace of God that they continue to seek God with all their heart, soul, and mind. When understanding this the church must have a greater appreciation for the difficulty it is for these parents to simply worship their God on a weekly basis. Therefore, Deuteronomy 6:5 is a beautiful picture of a special needs parent or guardian giving extraordinary efforts to worship God.

In Deuteronomy 6:5 there is a list of expectations regarding one’s love toward God and they are encompassed into the heart, soul, and might. The heart often was a symbol of intellect for a person and this intellect was the source of their worship. As Robert Alter states, “The heart is the seat of understanding in biblical physiology, but it is also associated with feelings.”⁷ The soul would represent the invisible attribute of a person including the will and sensibilities. “Might” naturally would include the physical aspect of a person.⁸ This understanding of intellect, emotion and physical parts of a person leaves nothing more for a person to give. Although it is clear that God is indicating attributes of a person it is also clear that he does not specifically need to draw

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 3, *The Writings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 641.

⁸ Kalland, *Deuteronomy*, 64.

out analysis of each attribute but rather is referring to a person as a whole. A pure and complete surrender to the one true God is all that can be given if someone chooses to worship him. It becomes apparent that God wants the entire essence of a person and anything short of this would be an act of disobedience against God's commands.

The religious thought of the Jewish leaders at that time most certainly encircled around the Shema and Jesus's response would have been recognized by all present. When thinking of Jewish traditions, the Shema is one that must be noted as a highly preserved and respected aspect of their traditions. "To love God as it commands is to place oneself within the orbit of his saving grace because the Shema, the heart and core of the Old Testament law, was designed, as Paul said, to be 'put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith'"⁹ In addition, it highlights again that the one true God is the only one that they should worship and he commands pure obedience of his followers. The notion that Israel as a nation or even individual followers of God would feel compelled to love God in a lackluster or halfhearted manner was a rejection of God. The leaders in the Jewish community would not accept anything less than full commitment toward God.

Deuteronomy as a whole is a continuation of the law and a more detailed version that quickly became one of the most important books of the Torah and to the Jewish community. The Decalogue that precedes chapter 6 creates an outline for God's command in the form of the Ten Commandments. Then God outlines the exact way to fulfill these commandments and that is where Deuteronomy becomes so important—knowing the commandment is one thing but knowing the actions behind fulfilling the commandment is essential. That being said, Deuteronomy 6:5 clearly is intended to show that a follower of God must love God through pure obedience and self-dedication of one's entire self, heart, soul, and strength.

⁹ Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 162.

Lev 19:18b

The laws in Leviticus played an important role in the Jewish community and it still does today and served to “consecrate yourselves and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44). This particular verse—“love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18)—seems to be something that the New Testament authors came back to time and time again. Paul used this verse on two occasions. In Romans 13, Paul is discussing the need to submit to authority and goes on to talk about love and the importance it plays in the fulfillment of the law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:9-10). Later, Paul is writing in Galatians about the freedom we have in Christ and the need to follow this freedom with love and avoid the danger to “devour one another” (Gal 5:14-15). Incredibly, Paul has seen this law in Leviticus of loving your neighbor as yourself as a key to fulfilling the law. This is important because that seems to be exactly what the context of Leviticus 19 is discussing in the first place. Leviticus 19:1-17 discuss a variety of laws that the Jewish community must follow such as respect your mother and father (v.1), to the sacrificial ordinance (vv. 5-8), to finally interpersonal relationships (vv. 9-18).¹⁰ But the end of this list of laws is “love your neighbor as yourself” and it is as if all the other laws hinge on this particular understanding. Can you really respect your mother and father without loving your neighbor as yourself? Can the Fellowship Offerings truly mean anything without the law of love? The truth is Paul did not think they could and neither did Jesus as we will see.

Loving your neighbor and the poor and needy is not a new understanding to the Israel’s legal code for it is also mentioned in Exodus 23:4-5 and Deuteronomy 22:1-4. Loving your neighbor seems to be the climax of the sections here and in fact it seems to be regarded by some as the central principle of the law. As mentioned previously this law

¹⁰ R. Laird Harris, *Leviticus*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 605.

seems to be the law that others hinge on, and the New Testament authors continue to repeat this theme throughout. First John 3:11 states, “For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.” From the beginning John states what should draw our eyes back to Leviticus 19, John also uses it in 13:35. Paul uses these principles again in 1 Thessalonians 4:9, 1 Corinthians 8:11, and Ephesians 4:2, as does Peter in 1 Peter 1:22 and 2:17, but the most compelling reminder of love your neighbor is in a parable in Luke 10—The Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan is a story of both loving your neighbor and helping the unfortunate, which is precisely what the Samaritan did. This is significant because in Luke 10:36 after telling the story Jesus asks the question, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a *neighbor* to the man who fell among the robbers?” (emphasis added). This seems to be a unique way to phrase the question referring to the hero of the story—“The Samaritan” as a neighbor to the man.

Why would a neighbor be so obligated to help someone in this way? The truth is Jesus seems to be once again pointing to the need to love one another or in terms of Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It becomes even clearer when the question was asked in Luke 10:25, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” a lawyer asked this question. Jesus in responding to this man was to love the Samaritan, as your neighbor, hitting the expert of the law right where his sin was. It was well-known during this time that Samaritans were hated, Jesus pointed to this man’s pride of keeping the law and yet he really did not keep the action behind the law itself. Unlike SNF that work so diligently to get to worship weekly, most SNF have no interest to put in the effort in attending church. This is where the church must take hold of Leviticus 19:18 and love them with a great deal of care and compassion. As stated, before SNF feel rejected by the public already, they feel rejected by the medical community, and they feel left behind in the church community as well. It is imperative that the church regains its core

values of loving your neighbor and seek to witness, love and care for those families with special needs.

The Levitical law was set up in such a way that many of the laws hinged on others, and this was no exception. Clearly, “love your neighbor as yourself” is one that is the standard in which Israel should view many of the other laws, in fact it is the one that all other laws draw their source from. These laws were created to not only give them commands, but also give them instruction on how to follow them. To undervalue the laws today would be a mistake that we simply cannot afford, for the simple fact that so many New Testament authors either mentioned it directly or alluded to the fact that we must love one another. To ignore this law would be to miss the directive that gives evidence that we are the “children of God” (1 John 3). Knowing the context of these two verses that Jesus appointed as the greatest commandments is extremely important but knowing how Jesus used them in his context is equally important.

The relationship between the two commands is clear and many theologians have taken the Ten Commandments and seen them as a twofold division. Augustine and Calvin both did this where they ascribed the first tablet that Moses had all to duties toward God and the second tablet duties toward man.¹¹ There are arguments regarding the exact duties and how they are to be divided. Augustine follows three commandments on the first tablet and seven on the second, whereas Calvin and others have four on the first tablet and six on the second.¹² Regardless, there is a clear division, and this is important because the question for past theologians is how all the law is fulfilled within these two commandments. The truth is no matter how one is to divide the duties it is clear that there are a set of laws that pertain to God and how to follow those commandments. The second is regarding other individuals and how to treat them.

¹¹ Samuel J. Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks: A Complete Survey of Old Testament History and Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 59.

¹² Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*, 59.

To see these two commandments back-to-back suggest that there is a hierarchy of law that stems from love. As Craig Blomberg states, “The relationship of all the Old Testament to the double love commandment shows that there is a hierarchy of law that above all requires one’s heart attitude to be correct.”¹³ Jesus displays this principle of love in explaining the law throughout his ministry, no better example than the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 where he not only shows that principles of love are constant throughout but also shows how they can be applied in a variety of situations. These are the two greatest commandments because all other commandments flow from them, Jesus says, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” because the entire Old Testament hangs on these two commandments. Finally, the relationship between these two commandments cannot be separated, loving God, and loving your neighbor cannot be divorced in anyway. First John 4:20 states, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” The notion that you can love God but not love others is simply an impossibility, for Christ understood this, when he told of the greatest commandments. Answering the lawyer’s question, “Which is the Greatest Command?” Jesus delivers two commands that seem to be related significantly to one another. These two commands demonstrate that someone must have both love for God the Father *and* to others. Clearly either a believer has both the commands in their life, or they have neither. Dealing with special needs within the church can be difficult but following Christ’s words, a church must show grace by following the greatest commandments. The lawyer, after hearing these words acknowledges the truth behind Christ’s statement by saying in Mark 12:32-33, “You are right, teacher. You have truly said that he [God] is one, and there is no other but him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as

¹³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 335.

oneself, is much more than burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Thus, Christ is clear with his answer that these two commandments are the greatest commands and all the law and prophets hang on them.

The Church Is Showing Grace by Speaking up for the Special Needs Community (Prov 31:8-9)

Proverbs 31 has been used primarily to support what a wise, noble character of a woman should be and rightly so. However, this was an oracle that King Lemuel’s mother had told him over the years.¹⁴ A mother teaching her future king says this in Proverbs 31:8-9, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”¹⁵ One of the main issues that many Christian’s face today is the concept of just how do we love God and show it by love those around us, in particular loving the poor and needy? Proverbs 31:8-9 gives Christians a glimpse of what this means to care and love others that struggle with disabilities.

The writer of Proverbs 31 starts out this verse with “*open your mouth*, for the mute” (emphasis added). That is to say, speak up for those that do not have a voice, those that cannot speak for themselves, and those unable to speak rightly for the situation that they are in.¹⁶ This concept is very important to understand when it comes to SNF, because the reality is that both the child with the disability and the parents/family surrounding them, are mute to some degree. The child with a disability is mute for the simple fact that they are born this way, they know nothing else in their lives and see

¹⁴ F. C. Cook, ed., *The Bible Commentary: Proverb-Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1847), 83.

¹⁵ Allen P. Ross, *Proverbs*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 1128.

¹⁶ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs*, New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 162.

nothing wrong with their abnormality. These children will not speak up because they have no idea what to speak up for, nor do they know how to speak up.

For most parents and families, the anticipation for a new arrival of a baby is exciting and they are not only eagerly ready for the new arrival but future plans in their heads have already formed about the unborn child. Parents imagine how their child will interact with their older siblings. They think of colors to paint their bedrooms. Parents envision what toys they should get, the cute outfits they will wear, when suddenly the unthinkable happens, the doctor informs them that “something is wrong with your baby.” As Stephanie Hubach writes in her book *Same Lake Different Boat*, “The pediatrician entered my room and, after a brief introduction, announced ‘We believe that Timothy has a chromosomal abnormality.’ I remember feeling dizzy and disoriented, as if the physician’s words were being spoken through a funnel in another place.”¹⁷

This experience is real to everyone who has had to face these heavy words, regardless of whether it is in the hospital delivery room or sitting in a doctor’s office following test results. No one on earth is prepared for these paralyzing moments that for many parents this paralyzation last for days, weeks, months, years or even decades. The parents are mute for the simple fact that they have never expected this to happen to them. They do not know how to handle a special needs child. They have seen in their lifetime other people struggle with special needs individuals and now they are expected to be one of those people. Parents feel paralyzed and unable to truly take it all in when they find out the news of their child. The church’s first responsibility is to recognize and find ways to speak up for both the parents and the families with special needs children.

The answer to this responsibility can be a difficult one but lies within our understanding of Scripture. The bible states in 1 Timothy 5:8, “But if anyone does not

¹⁷ Stephanie O. Hubach, *Same Lake Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 25.

provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household he has denied that faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” This puts a great deal of pressure on a SNF, and therefore the church can help by, first and perhaps most important by displaying a love for the special needs community. The church should help parents see that their child is made in the image of God regardless of disability. The psalmist says, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb” (Ps 139:13). The church should exemplify this with care and love for special needs children as they would for any other child.

The church must pursue Psalm 139:13 with vigor and with no exceptions, welcoming all disabilities because God “formed” every inward part of these children and adults. “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exod 4:11), an understanding that the church must acknowledge and treat those with disabilities with the love of Christ. All human beings are made imperfect, some abnormality is present in all of creation because of the fall. Yet so many people, Christians included, see special needs as something different and undesirable, which needs to be held at a distance. Yet, God holds us all close: “He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart” (Isa 40:11). Helping a parent come to grips with the beauty of their child will always go a long way to helping them see their child in the splendor of God’s glory.

Most SNF suffer from what I feel is best described as selective mutism where they resist asking for help or accepting help, particularly when it comes to some type of childcare.¹⁸ The parents often feel that it is too much to ask to find someone that will watch a special needs child. In a special needs ministry is it reasonable to ask someone to understand the difficulties or even embarrassing aspects of special needs? Would a normal babysitter be willing to change a thirteen-year-olds diaper, or help set up a

¹⁸ Crystal Ours, interview with author, February 25, 2021.

feeding tube for an eighteen-year-old? Simply speaking, those are minor compared to some of the major difficulties that many SNF face.

Christ Speaking Up

To be clear there is no biblical mandate that suggest babysitting, however, Christians should learn from Christ who never turned his eyes away from those abnormalities that are unpleasant. In three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is an account of Jesus healing a woman that was suffering from an issue with bleeding and hemorrhaging. A woman like this would be considered unclean with a great stigma attached to her physical ailments. Yet, Christ looked at her and said, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering” (Mark 5:32-33). In Matthew 8:1-4 a man with leprosy came before Christ and asked for healing. Christ reached out his hand and touched the man and the man’s illness of leprosy left him and he was healed. Leprosy afflicted individuals who considered ritually unclean and ostracized from society itself— for this man to be within a crowd was in clear violation of Leviticus 13:46 and was unheard of during this time. Yet Jesus with his mercy and grace reaches out his hand and heals the man by touching him. Jesus reaching his hand out was even more shocking, than a man with leprosy going into a crowd and approach Jesus. Jesus is forming the framework of his healing ministry, which he is unconcerned with people’s appearances, illnesses, afflictions, or any other taboo’s that they may have. Rather, Jesus is interested in healing people and showing himself to be the Son of God by provide them comfort and hope in an uncomfortable and hopeless world. There should be no mistaking Christ intentions whether it was a man with leprosy, a woman deemed unclean, a deaf mute in Mark 7, healing the man with dropsy in Luke 14 or healing a paralytic man in John 5. Christ was never concerned with someone’s outward abnormality, rather his concern was a person’s belief in him as the Son of God.

Christ is clear when it comes to his ministry to reach those with conditions that would be considered unclean or abnormal. However, today Christians and churches both struggle to see the blessings that SNF and children are. Proverbs 31:8-9 shows us that Christians need to speak up for both the families and these children. By showing the beauty and blessings that lies within. Furthermore, the church needs to help parents know that it will not be afraid to stand up and help when others will turn them away. There is no a situation that should be shameful for a special needs parent to be worried about revealing to those within the church. Life is messy and sometimes Christians need to intervene in the mess to help clean it up and show the grace that Christ has shown all of us.

Old Testament Speaking Up

Other Old Testament text also gives specific examples of wisdom about speaking up for those in need as well. First Kings 3:16-28 discusses the dilemma of the two prostitutes, where they both had a child at the same time and one of the children tragically passes away. The mother of the child that passed steals the other child and both of the women find themselves before the king to resolve the issue; to whom this child belongs. Of note, it is important to notice that King Solomon listens to both of the women, this is critical because to speak up for someone you need to have a clear understanding of their needs and listening is key component in doing that. This aspect should not be underestimated when it comes to SNF, the first response of the church should be to listen to them and to allow them to talk plainly and openly. Then in verse 24 King Solomon said, “Bring me a sword.” and in verse 25, he then gave an order: “Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other.” It is not the response that anyone was expecting.¹⁹ A church does not stand as a judge to render a verdict to the

¹⁹ Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, New American Commentary, vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 113.

parents about their child but from this simple demonstration of wisdom the church can gain a great deal of understanding. A parent, mother, father, or guardian loves their child with special needs, would do anything for them. In many cases they have already done so much. The other aspect is that keen listening skills can help the church leaders see when a parent or couple is reaching a “burn out state,” once again speaking up starts with listening and being active listeners. In fact, the implications of a special need parent struggling with burn out can be devastating. Fatigue leading to neglect of the child is a very real risk, as is the increased possibility of divorce among special needs parents which increases about 23 percent according to a 2015 study.²⁰ Without question the church needs to have a diligent ear toward the SNF and their situation. The church also needs to use discernment to help the families gain a voice.

Another passage demonstrating wisdom in speaking up for those in need is 2 Samuel 12:4-11. Here, a woman from Tekoa comes and throws herself at the mercy of King David, where she explains her troubles as having a husband that has passed and two sons that have quarreled and one has killed the other. She cries out to save the life of her son that is still alive, and for her own safety.²¹ King David listens to her pleas and grants both of them to her, saying, “Not one hair on your son’s head will fall to the ground” (2 Sam 14:11). King David heard the pleas of someone in need and granted them to her. This too is a lesson for the church. Once again, the judge, or in this case king, listened to the person in need. Far too many times a church anticipates the needs without listening to the person. The king listened to her request and made a verdict on the issue.

²⁰ Eun Ha Namkung et al., “The Relative Risk of Divorce in Parents of Children With Developmental Disabilities: Impacts of Lifelong Parenting,” *American Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 120, no. 6 (2015): 521, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://meridian.allenpress.com/ajidd/article-abstract/120/6/514/6317/The-Relative-Risk-of-Divorce-in-Parents-of?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

²¹ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary, vol. 7 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 389.

This mother's story is one that a SNF can relate. When a child is born with special needs their siblings often times will get overshadowed because of the constant care that must be given to the other child. This creates tension between siblings and between parent and children. The church should not minister exclusively to the child with special needs or their parents, rather the church should also seek to help guide the siblings through these difficult times as well. The church should remind the siblings and their parents that they are important as well and they deserve some attention. The church needs to recognize these issues that can arise, step in and speak up for the voices of the siblings of a special needs child. Having a game night or a time away from the family to learn to be a kid again and remove them even for a short time away from a special needs life is important. Again, King David delivers a verdict to the woman to protect her and her son, the church must listen and find the clues to where they might be able to help. The church must show grace to those struggling to get through life. They must speak up for those in need and they must act when action is appropriate. Life is complicated and difficult for all of us, and Christians must learn to support and be there for all that are in need and learn that God's grace is for us all.

The Church Is Showing Grace by Showing Hospitality to the Special Needs Community (Luke 14:1-24)²²

In Luke 14:1-24 Christ tells two parables about a wedding guest and a great banquet. Christ begins by addresses the guess of the feast and states, "Do not sit down in a place of honor" because someone of greater honor may come and unseat you from that place. Instead, the guest should take the place of lower status and that way the host can come to you and tell you that you should be sitting in a higher place of honor. This parable starts with the guest but quickly turns to the host himself. Christ gives us a

²² Much of this section was influenced by Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

stunning example of how we are supposed to invite people into our lives and show hospitality to those less fortunate. As this parable unfolds, Christ talks to the man holding the feast and says,

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. (Luke 14:12-14)

This statement is similar to what was stated in Luke 6:32-36 where in essence we should love our enemy because even sinners do for those that they expect great things from.

Certainly, the host should not expect something in return and that is where SNF come squarely into play. A mother going through a divorce dealing with an autistic child has nothing to offer the church or their members. She is spent emotionally, mentally, and physically, but by the grace of God she is continuing to search for a spiritual relationship with the Lord. Therein lies the amazing grace of God that she is still reaching out for a spiritual life.²³ The church and its members need to understand that she will never volunteer for nursery duties on Sunday. Sunday mornings in worship service for forty-five minutes to an hour is likely the only break she has all week. She craves to be with the Lord where her mind can focus solely on him. Matthew 11:28 gives us the reason why she is seeking him; “come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burdens is light.” For every special need parent and family that seeks time with fellow believers it is also a time of rest for them.

As a church, allowing someone the opportunity to come to church to experience the presence of God and not expect anything in return from them is vital to the

²³ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1904), 35.

relationship between SNF and the church. Seeing Christ look around the room of this banquet and saying to the host these are the wrong people to invite. Christ digs at all of our hearts in a variety of ways here. First, Christ recognizes that people usually do things for others expecting something in return. Jesus quickly squelches this notion and says to “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind . . . because they cannot repay you” (Luke 14:13). This is not normal for any culture at any time. Everyone gravitates to those things that will give them a return. Invite those that will later invite you and gives to those that will later give back to you. This should not be so Christ states and in fact you should do the opposite—you should invite those that cannot pay you back.

Second, Christ says we need to invite those that are different to than us, not always searching out those that are like us in so many ways. Perhaps it is someone that has less money, or perhaps it is someone with a different cultural background or a different color of skin. Perhaps it is someone that has a disability. Christ told the parable that when the king had heard that none of those invited would be attending he told his servants to go out and bring in “the poor and crippled and blind and lame” (Luke 14:21). The king told his servants to go out further to the “highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23). The overwhelming grace that Christ shows here is compelling to sinners and it should be inspiring to Christians to be open hosts to all people.²⁴

Third, a church does not stop at being a place for special needs parents to come to seeks God. It is also the responsibility of the church to actively seek these individuals and families in accordance with the Great Commission. Sharing with them the rest that can be found in Christ. The example of God welcoming with the fullness of his grace all that have sinned and are unworthy to sit at his table, should humble Christians and churches alike to actively seek those in need. Families that deal with special needs on a

²⁴ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 277.

daily basis are often confronted with their faith being tested. They “may face a vast array of legitimate spiritual struggles challenging them to wrestle with biblical truths about God’s love, his goodness, and his sovereignty overall things. They may also realize a need to exercise a deeper dependence on God to provide for them in their circumstances.”²⁵ The picture of the great banquet is a reminder to the church that there is room for all, including those with special needs. “What a glorious declaration is this in regard to the gospel!”²⁶

Example of God’s Glory in John 9:1-7

Although throughout the New Testament there are great examples of hospitality for God’s glory, John 9 is an especially unique example. At the beginning of John 9 the reader is confronted with a reality that many Christians face. John 9:2 says as the disciples passed a blind man, they asked Christ “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Is sin of our ancestors/parents the cause of our situation or is it through our own sins? This situation can be anything from illness to a disability that someone is born with. Special needs parents ask this from the onset of the discovery of their child with special needs. Throughout the life of a special needs parent or guardian questions arise: Why God would seem to have punished them? Why is their life made substantially more difficult than other people with “normal” children? What did they do wrong and how did they disobey God to deserve such a situation? These questions will reside at some point during their parenting of such a medically, emotionally, mentally, and physically challenging child. This very question is one that Christ addresses to his disciples but interestingly it was his disciples that started the conversation as John 9:1-5 describes,

²⁵ Hubach, *Same Lake Different Boat*, 91-92.

²⁶ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament*, vol. 1, *Matthew and Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1847), 98.

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

Christ’s response was something that clearly the disciples did not expect, for they were looking back at Old Testament law, where it states, “Those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies’ lands because of their iniquity, and also because of their fathers they shall rot away like them” (Lev 26:39). Yet Christ tells them that this man’s blindness has nothing to do with sin at all, in fact this man’s blindness is to display the power of God.²⁷ The man was born blind, thus he has never seen the light of day, therefore his only choice in life is to become a beggar and rely on others to help him survive.

The first observation is perhaps the most troubling and most significant to the church today. The disciples were not moved by compassion, nor did they seek to help this man, rather they wanted to know the nature of his disability.²⁸ Following Christ for all this time they should have seen a blind man and sought to help, but rather they wanted to understand why he was the way he was. Churches today fall into similar traps, they see a special needs person and family and their first thoughts often are not how can we help, rather what a complicated situation they will now bring upon the church. What classes can this child be in? Will they disturb the other children? How can we avoid these annoyances and obstacles? Instead, the church should take Christ example and seek to serve them, seek to display the glory and honor of God and in the process show them the saving power of Christ. That should be the goal of the church and that should be how they approach the needs of a SNF, provide them a place to rest with the gracious hospitality of the church.

²⁷ Barnes, *Matthew, and Mark*, 279.

²⁸ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, New American Commentary, vol. 25A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 313.

Christ's reply to the disciples is also something that is worth noting. Rather than simply acknowledging that sin could have played a role in this man's blindness, he stated that "it was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." Certainly, the bible does teach that sin can have an effect on someone's health; as James 5:15-16 states, "The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." From understanding that "*if* he has committed sins" (emphasis added) meaning that a person can be ill and dealing with sickness or a disability (like the blind man) because of sin, because as James continues "pray for one another, that you may be *healed*" (emphasis added). In this context it is important to see that praying and confessing plays a role in our health and in our life when in the case of sin. But Scripture does not stop there; in fact, Paul states that people actually die because of sin and mainly unrepentant sin:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (1 Cor 11:27-30)

Again, can Christians really look at sin as something that springs forth disabilities, illnesses, sicknesses and even death? The truth of the matter is that Christians already know this to be true based on Genesis 3 and Romans 6:23—"for the wages of sin is death." It is through illnesses, sicknesses and disabilities that should not drive us to question Scripture, rather it should drive us to hate sin even more. For Christ, his focus was on the glory of God to be displayed and although a child with autism or Down syndrome or any other disability likely will not have the miracle of healing from their disability, is still a lesson that they do have much to teach us regarding our own image of God in our hearts. Christians can show the power of Christ and see the power of Christ in

these individuals if the church learns to embrace them, learns to love them, and learns to understand them. No, likely the disability of the child is not from a particular sin, but from original sin in Genesis 3. However, that does not detract from the notion that the power of God will and can be displayed through them.

Last, it is important for us to see how Christ choose to heal the man that was blind. As John 9:6-7 states, “Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). So, he went and washed and came back seeing.” Certainly, Christ with all of his power and divine grace had no need to use spit to heal, but this is not the first time. Mark 7 shows Christ healing a deaf, speech impaired man by putting his fingers in his ears and then spitting on his finger and touching the man’s tongue and the man is healed. In Mark 8, Christ heals another blind man by spitting directly into his eyes, and again the man’s sight is returned. Christ is showing all that he will use his body to heal. Christ will soon be nailed to a cross with his blood dripping from his body and the wood-stained crimson red for our sins. That same blood heals us from our own blindness and disabilities, that same blood cures our alignment of sin and darkness. Spit is something that can be seen as an extension of his body and our need for his body to heal us. This notion that Christ’s blood heals all mankind, extends to those that are parents of disabled children and those that are experiencing a disability. The church is that extension to the lost and those in need of Christ and they should be the leaders directing SNF and their children to the saving grace of Christ. It is the church that needs to encourage SNF to find the saving grace of Christ. For the church to ignore these individuals is a clear disobedience to Christ’s teachings. Christ describes such a pursuit in Matthew 25:42-46 where he states,

“For I was hungry, and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger, naked, or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?” Then he will answer them, saying, “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of

the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Christ demonstrates that if the church or specifically if Christians do not seek and help those that are in need or as Christ states “the least of these,” then it is the same as not helping Christ. This is a tremendous indictment, and it should drive all Christians to do their part in seeking and helping special needs and their families alike.

CHAPTER 3

KNOWING A CHURCH'S OBSTACLES IN SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRY

Understanding the obstacles of a special needs ministry is a complex subject and without questions must be unveiled in many different layers. There are three credible resources for a special needs ministry to consider as strong resources for church leaders while exploring the start-up of a special needs ministry. Although they do not detail exactly what is uncovered in this chapter, they are worthy of attention: Kate Brueck's *Start with Hello: Introducing Your Church to Special Needs Ministry*¹ is a credible resource about how to begin conversation and encouragement for parents and leaders in the church to start the program. However, this book lacks the depth required in this project. Adam Riveiro and Dianne Riveiro's *Ministering to Children with Special Needs: The Journey from Ignorance to Dependence on God*² and Katie Wetherbee and Jolene Philo's *Every Child Welcome: A Ministry Handbook for Including Kids with Special Needs*³ deliver additional important aspects of a special needs ministry. The authors define special needs terminology, biblical understanding, and application. Albeit great resources, they pursue different avenues than discussed in the present discussion. With that said, all are encouraged to seek out as many resources as possible when considering a special needs ministry.

¹ Kate Brueck, *Start with Hello: Introducing Your Church to Special Needs Ministry*, Irresistible Church Series (Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends International Disability Center, 2015).

² Adam Riveiro and Dianne Riveiro, *Ministering to Children with Special Needs: The Journey from Ignorance to Dependence on God* (Easton, MA: Ready Scribe, 2020).

³ Katie Wetherbee and Jolene Philo's *Every Child Welcome: A Ministry Handbook for Including Kids with Special Needs* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015).

Far too often, judgment falls upon people associated with a special needs person or the person themselves. Many of the glares are directed at the special needs individuals and their families. Perhaps the glare comes from the apparent physical disability of the individual, or perhaps it is their attitude or behavior. As Emily Colson explains, “I tried not to care about the people staring at us, to keep my focus on helping Max. I tried not to lose an ounce of energy to humiliation. I [have] poured sweat—all those stifled tears that find their way out.”⁴ Emily is the daughter of Charles Colson, who is best known for being an aid to Richard Nixon but has become a strong Christian advocate and nationally known speaker. Emily’s son Max has autism and was throwing a tantrum on the floor of a store. Her story is common. No matter the place that special needs individuals travel, including the invisible special needs, they will have eyes on them for one reason or another. Invisible special needs are not a visible disability but can manifest in unseen ways such as seizure disorder, a mental disorder such as autism or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and others.

The eyes of judgment follow them because the disabled are not what the world considers normal to society. In fact, parents look, act, and *are* different in many ways, which people find judgment worthy. Sitting in a pew of a church is no less different from standing in aisle of a grocery store with your child. The anxiety of the looks, the worry that your child will draw attention, or looks directed at you, for a parent is almost unbearable. Even strong Christian parents feel the pain of dealing with such difficult situations. As Stephanie Hubach explains, “As we sat down, we heard our close friend and youth pastor announce, ‘Timothy Robert Hubach was born last Sunday morning. Fred and Steph have asked me to let you know that he was born with Down Syndrome.’”

⁴ Emily Colson, *Dancing with Max: A Mother and Son Who Broke Free* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 28.

The audible gasps of our church family gave voice to the raw pain in our own hearts.”⁵

The very church in which this couple had been a part of for many years gasped at the notion of a special needs child. Knowing that the conversations after church will focus only Timothy’s disability, instead of the blessed gift that a child is, regardless of abilities or disability. The majority of churches have it wrong, and these churches continually put obstacles in front of itself and those they should be reaching in the special needs communities. Certainly, there are obstacles within SNF themselves that must be overcome but the church cannot and should not place other obstacles within the church that will further disrupt the mission to reach SNF.

The church is supposed to be a place of love, hospitality, and care to everyone. So why is it still putting obstacles in the way of special needs individuals and their families? Perhaps a better question that deserves an answer is, “Why do people, Christians, and society see special needs as a hinderance in their normal everyday life?” Reading a churches mission statement, one will see a church claim, “We are here for the lost, the broken, the hopeless,” but they fail to see the fine print on their hearts which continues by expressing verbally or otherwise, “unless of course part of your brokenness is physically or mentally flawed causing my worship style to suffer.” Nothing receives more eye glaring looks like a non-verbal Down syndrome child making noises in service or an autistic child becoming upset over loud worship music. The eye glares communicate one thing: “do not disturb my worship time with the Lord with your own struggles.”

Yet, this is the presumption SNF frequently face. The pressure is overwhelming to parents and caregivers who are already overwhelmed in everyday life. If my child grunts or throws a fit or causes a scene, how will people react? Will they

⁵ Stephanie O. Hubach, *Same Lake Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 33.

scatter like gun fire has just gone off? Or will they be kind and offer help and provide comfort? Max's mom, Emily knows far too well what happens the majority of the time: "It is remarkable how quickly space clears around you when your autistic child explodes in public."⁶ No one rushes in to assist, no one wants to deal with it but the child's mother, that people around her are now judging, questioning "cannot she stop this?," she needs to "put more discipline in that boys life," or, "I will never allow our child to act that way in public." And here the world sits in the twenty-first century with people struggling through life, loving their child but emotionally and physically spent from the work required to make life functional. The church can be a part of these people's lives if they only choose. They must identify and eliminate as many obstacles as possible which stand between the SNF and the church.

Everyone can find an obstacle in one way or another, but every church must address three sets of obstacles: emotional, physical/financial, and spiritual. Each of these obstacles come with "*active obstruction*" or "*passive obstruction*." This is important to identify first because it directly correlates with how the leadership and congregation might treat the obstacle. First, *active obstruction*, is something that a church or a person is aware of but chooses not to fix the issue. This can be as easy to identify as a missing wheelchair ramp, which, eliminates the possibility of anyone in a wheelchair to attend church. However, active obstructions may also be harder to identify. For example, if a Sunday school class cannot accommodate a child with special needs when that family gains the courage to attend Sunday but then are told "just keep them with you today" and the church looks the other way hoping the family does not return forcing them to resolve the issue. *Passive obstruction*, on the other hand, is simply being ignorant of something that needs to be fixed. Some simple examples of passive obstruction may be not having a quiet area that a child with autism can go, away from the louder area where worship

⁶ Colson, *Dancing with Max*, 28.

service is being held. More difficult passive obstructions may be the cold heartedness of people within the church, turning a smug glare and an inattentive heart toward a SNF. The Lord works to change the hearts of people to, enlightens, softens, and shows the true image bearers of Christ in a special needs individual. With this base understanding a church can now begin to look at their obstacles and address them one by one as they move to becoming a special needs friendly church.

Emotional Obstacles

Emotional obstacles within a church can be some of the strongest issues to overcome. The reason for this is because it usually stems from either upbringing, background, or an experience for the church or an individual. This was exhibited through the gasping of the congregation regarding the birth announcement of Hubach's child, Timothy. The gasp can easily be associated with the stigma behind special needs. The very nature of having a child with a disability is unthinkable to many. Emotions can be a strong driving force in the reactions of others, and they can have significant consequences. With some strong leadership, while taking a critical look at the emotions of a church, opportunities may surface that can lead to a special needs ministry.

Stigma of Special Needs

Thus, overcoming stigma is the first major emotional obstacle for the church. This active obstruction is heard through a public gasp within a congregation, or the scattering of people in the aisles. The story of the stigma is, "I want to have nothing to do with that situation." SNF have been told this through every way imaginable, inside, and outside of the church, healthcare providers have gone out of their way to avoid dealing with special needs issues. Other parents have intentionally or unintentionally avoided invitations to SNF while churches have failed to make accommodation to reach the special needs community. The church must take an honest look at themselves when they attempt to determine the stigma that resides within their walls. Is it the people that are

uninformed and uneducated regarding special needs? Is it a lack of staying up to date and relevant in the Sunday school curriculum that all children can be involved in? Or perhaps it is the leadership in the church that are simply missing the mark when it comes to leading their church in this area. No matter the situation the stigma of special needs must be addressed within a church. Allowing unwarranted stigmas will create a division between the congregation and the SNF before the ministry ever begins.

Lack of Knowledge on How to Help

The second emotional obstacle is the churches lack of knowledge on how to help. This passive obstruction is significant and a crucial step in learning to aid SNF, because there are ways to help, ways to judge, and sometimes both ride a very thin line. Words are important to SNF. For example, a person should be careful not to move from offering help to unsolicited advice. A special needs parent can use assistance in childcare or help with daily tasks, but they do not need advice on how to calm down their child or get them to eat better or whatever the case maybe. The church does need to get involved, as Laura Story explains when her husband Martin was diagnosed with a brain tumor and was in and out of the hospital. On one particular day she recalled, “To me, one of the sweetest sights was when two or three of Martin’s Bible study friends came to play cards with him. These men worked full-time and had families and other obligations. Instead of just studying the love of Christ, these men lived it by loving Martin.”⁷ The church must be involved in ways that can only be seen as Christ’s love in action, and never mistaken for judgment. Being active in the life of a SNF is more important than solving their issues. In fact, trying to solve their issues projects to them a lack of understanding of what they have been through and all the different resolutions they have already tried.

⁷ Laura Story, *When God Doesn't Fix It: Lessons You Never Wanted to Learn, Truths You Can't Live Without* (Nashville: W, 2015), 86-87.

Learning to help is something that will take time and effort, because every family is different in their needs, but they all need some type of help.

Gaining Trust

Third, the church must be diligent in gaining the trust of the families. Gaining trust can be an active and passive obstruction. Remember, these families are used to abandonment, many could have been abandoned by a spouse over this issue, as well as, healthcare providers, family, friends, and sadly churches. Building trust is an important part of every relationship anyone has ever had. When two people get married they usually have spent some time together building trust, friendships are built on trust, and parent/child relationships are built on trust. The difference is people do not typically choose to get into the world of special needs. It is scary, it is unknown, and it can be emotionally and physically messy. For many this is the elephant in the room, but as Christians we can take comfort in knowing that Christ helps us through scary moments in life. It should be an encouragement to recognize the fear of getting involved and leverage this fear to help us move forward to a resolution. SNF have learned to avoid such difficult relationships because they themselves do not want people to know what their life is truly like. That child who gets violently upset, the child who takes off their diaper and plays with their waste, the child who has no response when spoken too, and so much more. But the beauty found once that trust is built, and the relationships form is like nothing else. To allow someone into the special need's world is the equivalent of someone saying I love you first in a romantic relationship, the risk is huge, because if it is met with unacceptance or judgment the relationship will never be repaired. But if it is accepted, the bond will be unshakable and lasting.

Know the Room

Last, the church needs to take the time to know the people in the room. Some special needs are clear, with either a physical or cognitive impairment or disability. The

leaders of the church should easily be able to identify them and be able to help them accordingly. This is a passive obstruction that can be resolved with active awareness of others. However, there are a set of special needs that are invisible and only manifest in other ways. For example, ADHD is a common disorder about 11 percent of children from the ages 3 to 17 experience some level of ADHD.⁸ These individuals live with uncertainties of how people will react to their uncontrollable behavior no matter how it manifests. ADHD patients often have an elevated level of stress associated with their disorder that can also be debilitating. Anxiety disorders are a real issue among Americans. It is estimated that one out of every four, 13 to 18-year-olds has some type of anxiety disorder, of which 6 percent is considered severe.⁹ There are other disorders such as seizure disorders, muscular dystrophy, and many others that can heavily affect the individual and their fellowship in the local church.

These invisible special needs disorders are something that leaders of a church should know about their congregation. The means of gaining this knowledge is simple, it is about building relationships. As Laura Story continued her life with her husband who was diagnosed with a brain tumor and is now dealing with significant brain damage, she recalls the day she was told that Martin would be coming home. “How would I even get him up the stairs? What am I going to do? How will I earn a living for both of us?”¹⁰ Laura, battling the issues that are about to take place with Martin still unable to walk well enough to get upstairs, and the day before discharge, she ran into a friend, Carol Pope. Carol was more than a friend but also the pastor’s wife. After hearing these issues that Laura would have brought home with Martin, Carol said “You’re going to come to our

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Trends in the Parent-Report of Health Care Provider-Diagnosis and Medication Treatment for ADHD: United States, 2003-2011,” CDC Web Archive, last modified August 9, 2022, accessed May 3, 2020, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/features/key-findings-adhd72013.html>.

⁹ National Institute of Mental Health, “Any Anxiety Disorder,” accessed October 24, 2021, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder>.

¹⁰ Story, *When God Doesn't Fix It*, 92.

house. We just finished building a suite for Randy's mother when she comes to visit. It will be perfect for Martin until you get things figured out."¹¹ Although Martin certainly had strong physical disabilities it was the relationship that Carol committed to, for the betterment of Laura and her husband. This is no different with invisible special needs, when you have a relationship, share a meal, laugh, or even cry together you will gain trust. It is through this trust that people open up about their invisible special needs. If a church is truly dedicated to reaching families and individuals with special needs, they must commit to the relationship that must be built in order to fully understand their situation emotionally.

Physical and Financial Obstacles

Knowing the emotional obstacles in the church is only a small part of the battle, because many churches struggle with the physical and financial situation that a special needs ministry may bring to the church. How much money will it take and how to accommodate special needs regarding the physical layout of the church are both relevant questions. Many churches have limited budgets and space to accommodate others. When looking to have SNF and individuals in your church, a church must evaluate several distinct aspects about the physical and financial situations of the church. First, it is important to know the sensory output of your church, which means how much sound, lights, physical touch, and smell does your church produce. Second, assessing what kind of physical space can be designated for special needs and determine if this space can be modified in anyway. Third, evaluate what the financial investment the church can make toward a special needs ministry. Each of these three play a critical role in the overall experience that the ministry can deliver for these families. With the consideration of the

¹¹ Story, *When God Doesn't Fix It*, 93.

type of special needs requirements predominate in the community, the church can begin to develop and implement much needed changes.

Sensory Output of the Church

In general, people do not pay much attention to our senses, because they typically do not cause a strong reaction from us. But they are important to us. For example, if we are listening to the wonderful sounds of the billowing river nearby and a car suddenly drives by playing music that interrupts our enjoyment of the river, we quickly become aware of our senses. But for a person who is highly stimulated by these senses (often someone with a special needs), “ordinary life comes at him like a 747”¹² and is often very overwhelming. Many times, this *passive obstruction* sets off a special needs issue like crying, outbursts, or withdrawal from a special needs individual with an overload of sensory input. A church should keep in mind these behaviors often surface because of the fear that the extra sensory triggers in them. All they want to feel is safe and secure, but the passive obstructive world is overwhelming. Without knowing an effective way to communicate these issues, they express them as behavioral issues. Therefore, a church must remain mindful of these issues and take steps to help the special needs individual feel safe and secure within the church walls. An average church will produce five types of sensory outputs that we must be aware of: sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and touch (feelings).¹³ Taking each of these into consideration is an important first step for a church to reach SNF.

Sights and sounds affect the worship in general and should be understood by a church regardless of special needs. What one person finds as a good volume, another will find painfully too loud, and this may be even more amplified for someone with special

¹² Colson, *Dancing with Max*, 27.

¹³ Barbara J. Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Grand Rapids: Friendship Ministries, 2011), 28.

needs. Knowing this can help a church provide alternative music, music volume or ways to listen to the sermon, also having alternative types of worship for them during these times of strong sound sensations. As Mandy Peggram stated about her own experience with ADHD, “I focus better when I am coloring, it helps me retain the sermon better and I can sit longer during this time.”¹⁴ Mandy has adapted to worship and retains the sermon better despite the difficulties she has with ADHD. With the sound output understood, the church should also consider the sights that are being presented to those in the congregation. Many churches inadvertently have too many lights, strobe effects or other types of visual stimulation designed to enhance the worship experience. For those who are sensitive to sights, they accomplish just the opposite. The sights may become a distraction and, in many ways, an unbearable church experience. Similar to the sound, understanding that a visually enhanced worship service can produce the opposite desired effects, a church must evaluate and figure out alternative solutions. A low sensory service or a safe room where the volume can be adjusted, and the visual experience eliminated are basic options for a church to consider. No matter the resolution to the sight and sound output, a church can make a significant impact with a safe, secure, and more spiritually welcoming environment for the individual.

Taste and smell go hand in hand in everyone’s life such as when the fragrance of your mother’s pot roast surfaces to enhance a meal. The opposite can be true where an unpleasant smell can trigger a gag reflex simply because the undesirable smell produces undesirable tastes. Therefore, when we acknowledge that a church should be comfortable to everyone this should include the smell of a church. Without stating the obvious, a church must be diligent to expunge any undesirable smells, from bathroom areas, from old carpet spill or any other miscellaneous issues that could result in a negative smell response. Some churches are well aware of smells that come with an old run-down

¹⁴ Mandy Peggram, phone interview by author, September 14, 2021.

building, and many think this is an unavoidable situations. However, a church has many recourses in this manner. An Ozone generator can be purchased with minimal cost and creates a neutral smell that causes zero stimulation for the sensitivities of the special needs person. But some people, with or without special needs, find candle fragrances, sprays, or any other artificial scents negative. Tastes and smells can elicit emotions in individuals and for those with a special need that can seem scary and cause a reaction. Thus, a church must attempt to remain neutral in terms of smells and taste.

Last, when a church is to understand its sensory output it must also understand, it is sense of touch. Many people within the church share their love and care for one another through physical touch such as hugs. Many individuals with special needs have a strong reaction with touch, and thus it needs to be limited and monitored to avoid any issues. A mother of a autistic child recently told me that I am welcome to give their son a hand shake but you must ask him first and allow him to express if he is in the emotional mindset to have physical touch.¹⁵ This is the reality for many people with special needs, as noted prior ADHD individuals sometimes are overwhelmed and even if their “love language” is physical touch, they prefer to avoid it, in times of overstimulation. As a church, the members must be sensitive to those issues and must be aware that physical touch is something that needs to be limited or at minimum be acknowledged and offered before initiated. However, along with touch is any texture that might be present in either a craft time or a Sunday school lesson. Texture can be an irritant to some, and those people simply avoid such textures but when they are young, they still do not have the knowledge that avoidance is the best option. Therefore, if a teacher knows that a child or participant has a special need, they should ask the parent or caretaker if a texture can cause an issue, because the parent will have dealt with this issue many times and be able to give a full breakdown of the textures to be avoided.

¹⁵ Nikki Loans, phone interview by author, September 15, 2021.

As discussed, the church must identify their sensory output, and how it might affect the SNF that they are trying to reach. Whether the sensory is sound/sight, or taste/smell or touch, it is important to be aware of these issues moving forward into a special needs ministry. Identification is only the first step in realizing the potential issues. Once the issues are identified they must be resolved as much as possible within the walls of the church. Most pastors or church leaders do not normally know or consider this. Therefore, it would be wise that they consult with someone knowledgeable regarding special needs and have them assist in the evaluation process. Leaders could consult with the families about how they can better accommodate their needs. Asking the questions is an action that must take place because everyone is different and experiences different reactions to their own sensory input.

Space for a Special Needs Ministry

The space needed is truly dependent on the special needs demand in your area. A notable example of this active obstruction is knowing that many special needs individuals can be placed in everyday Sunday school classes and learn along with their peers. The leader of the class must be made aware of any behaviors or needs that the individual may have throughout their time in the class. There are many examples where a special needs individual cannot be placed in a typical class for a variety of reasons. Many autistic individuals “respond differently to sensory stimuli,”¹⁶ therefore it is critical to talk with the individual and their caretakers to see what the best resolution to that issue. A church of any size typically can find a place within the church they can designate as a rest or reset area, where the individual can go to desensitize from the issue that they are experiencing.

¹⁶ Newman, *Autism and Your Church*, 28.

The real issue is if a church can accurately provide a space that is accommodating to these individuals. Certainly, many churches are limited in the space they have and the smaller the church the less opportunities they have to provide such a space. Awareness, of this issue is key to unlocking the true potential of every church being special needs friendly. The church with no space available should be one that utilizes more creativity and follow the parent's suggestions. A parent that sees a church willing to try and accommodate their loved one will help in many ways to create a situation or a place that will be acceptable to them, particularly if it provides them a time of worship, fellowship, and relationship with others. Acknowledging that space is an issue should not prevent any church from seeking opportunities to reach the special needs community.

Churches have always expressed the inability to do certain ministries for financial reasons. This is a battle that must not be overlooked when it comes to a special needs ministry. The typical financial resources needed in the ministry truly depends on the need around the church. For example, if a church is in an area that has a high need for incontinent individuals, and an adult size changing table is needed. A changing table such as this can range from \$800 to \$5000,¹⁷ which, for many churches is a prohibitive purchase. Or, perhaps the main need within the community is a church that has wheelchair access, which most churches follow the Americans with Disability Act of 1990.¹⁸ This does not mean that all areas of the church are accessible, but often only the sanctuary. Someone unable to walk cannot go upstairs to the Sunday school classrooms or they must travel outside and around the building to attend a potluck in the basement. These are issues that must be addressed for a church to allow the full access to all of the

¹⁷ Max-Ability, "Changing Tables for Every Special Need," accessed October 24, 2021, <https://max-ability.com/special-needs-changing-tables-2/?c=aacf2d960ac3>.

¹⁸ United States Department of Labor, "Laws and Regulations," accessed October 24, 2021, <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/disability/laws>.

special needs group activities. Churches often miss opportunities to work with other associations, state conventions, and other resources that will provide financial support when needed. When a church makes a claim that financial issues are keeping them from moving forward, it must be backed with proactive actions to seek funds through channels set up for those needs. The lack of seeking these funds is another example of active obstruction—knowing the issue but unwilling to make efforts to correct them.

The physical and financial obstacles clearly have their merits when it comes to each individual church. It is the obligation of the church to seek resolutions to these obstacles, for the church is to glorify the name of God and glorify our Savior Christ as Ephesians 3:20-21 states, “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever, Amen.” To obstruct people actively or passively from the ability to attend church is damaging to the name of Jesus. Taking the steps to understand the physical obstacles is the first step toward making the changes that will bring comfort and accessibility to special needs individuals and their families. Church life encounters obstacles in many ways but, the very nature of any obstacle is something that can be overcome. The church leadership, congregation, and the community can learn to overcome these physical and financial obstacles.

Spiritual Obstacles

Any pastor that is in tune to the heartbeat of their congregation should be able to identify some of his church’s spiritual weaknesses. Spiritual weaknesses are not something terribly detrimental to the church if they can be addressed and strengthened. However, spiritual weakness left unattended will quickly become a spiritual obstacle for future ministries. This is often the case when it comes to special needs ministry and the

congregation or leadership may not even know this issue is present until they are faced with it head on.

Someone that is seeking Jesus, seeking a spiritual lift from their difficult life of caring for a special needs individual, experience great pain, hurt and the sadness when they are told by a church, sorry we do not have the ability to have you here, there is simply no room. Families have expressed this exact sentiment over the years and yet the church does not realize that our Savior was treated the same way. As Luke 2:6-7 states, “While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloth and placed him in a manger, because there was *no room* for them in the Inn” (emphasis added). It is incredible to hear the words from a church, a place created by our Lord for worship and for those in need of spiritual uplifting, say to others, there is “no room at the Inn” for you.

Many may believe that this is an exaggeration, and sadly it is not. As one special needs parent once said, “My Down Syndrome son was only two years old, not mobile yet, not crawling, yet when I attempted to drop him off at the nursery they said, ‘we do not know what to do with him, could he stay with you in service?’ It broke me, my son was not wanted and that made me feel unwanted.”¹⁹ The church failed that day. The church fails many days in similar fashion when it comes to SNF. The reason behind this issue is a strong spiritual obstruction which can also present itself with a lack of spiritual understanding. That is why it is necessary for a church to identify passive obstacles and provide resolutions to these issues. Although these may be broad in nature, they all have four fundamental issues: lack of church hospitality, lack of spiritual maturity, lack willingness to meet their needs and be sympathetic to their situation and feelings, and showing mercy and grace to these families. Spiritual obstacles often present

¹⁹ Rebecca Paschall, interview by author, September 2, 2021.

as passive obstruction, but often have an active avoidance of spiritual growth, which, is the primary reason for lack of spiritual maturity.

Lack of Church Hospitality

Church hospitality is the very basic essence of any church and starts by having a welcoming environment to all who come to seek our Lord. The church cannot ignore their responsibilities regarding simple hospitality, yet so many churches overlook this important aspect of church, making this obstruction both active and passive. Jesus makes it clear throughout his earthly ministry that hospitality is of the utmost importance. Jesus said it himself, “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ For I came not to call the righteous but the sinners” (Matt 9:10-13).

A church is called to be a house of sinners, seeking the Great Physician in Christ, but that all begins with hospitality to all, an open-door policy that welcomes everyone. Special needs are no different, yet a church can swing in two directions: one, they are completely unwelcoming, or two, they think that special needs have some unique features which require some type of privileged acceptance. The fact is SNF and individuals only want to be treated like everyone else. “When addressing disability in the church, the goal is not to convey that people with special needs are somehow God’s special people—those who are due extraordinary rights and privileges. It is to restore a fair and respectful treatment of every person as a unique individual created in the image of God, including people with disabilities.”²⁰

The church must be a servant to those that enter their doors, a welcoming host with a desire not for self but for those seeking a place to worship. Jesus is our example of why servanthood is important as he says, “Whoever would be great among you must be

²⁰ Hubach, *Same Lake Different Boat*, 157.

your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45). The reality is, that SNF and individuals carry a burden that most do not and cannot understand, to relive that burden in a servanthood manner is just the beginning. Many SNF feel cursed by God, as they seek to know the answer to “Why me?” “Why this is a situation they must deal with and not others?” Their perception of reality is different from someone without a special needs individual to care for.

The purpose of the church is to realign worldly reality to God’s reality, the truth is, God’s truth seen through the lens of Scripture. “The truth is, we all may have different journeys, but the ultimate destination for each one of us is that we become more like Christ.”²¹ Many seek God’s church because of an internal feeling that the reality the world has presented to them is not full of truth. It lacks in many ways; thus, they seek truth, and they seek answers to the questions the world cannot answer. That is the responsibility of the church regardless of disability, special needs, or sinful behavior, to tell the truth of Christ, the truth of Scripture.

Hospitality is how the truth begins to be communicated to everyone that enters the doors of the church. The church is a house of sinners, seeking the restored strength of Christ in the hospital of spiritual healing and the hospitality for strangers alike is what Christ continually demonstrated. Reaching the lost, the hurting, the broken, is not a task that is done without some healing. The healing starts at the church, in fact, it starts at the doors of the church, from that first person that says, “Hello, welcome to church today, we are glad you are here.” A church will make a stronger impact within the community itself and within the special needs community if it simply practices the spiritual gifts of

²¹ Mary Tutterow, *The Heart of the Caregiver: From Overwhelmed to Overjoyed* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 22.

hospitality. The first step in hurdling the spiritual obstacles is learning to be a church of hospitality to all.

Lack of Spiritual Maturity

Many pastors recognize that a person's spiritual maturity has nothing to do with the length of time they have been a Christian. The reality is, if a Christian has not matured, grown, been disciplined to spiritual maturity, they may be just as juvenal now as they were when they first became a Christian. Lack of spiritual maturity is a passive obstruction that can be a difficult one to overcome. A Christian for thirty years does not want to hear that, but just as Paul told the church at Corinth, "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready" (1 Cor 3:2). The ministry has many Christians still in need of milk who are not ready for solid foods. Saddened by this notion are the people that believe they have a spiritual maturity in these manners, yet they miss the complete understanding of God and his creation and what the significance for every individual is.

As a church body so many people have missed the fundamental aspect of creation that God from the beginning said, "Let us make man in *our image, after our likeness*" (Gen 1:26; emphasis added). Forgotten, is that everyone is an image bearer of God, the child with autism, the Down syndrome boy, the little girl with cerebral palsy, the teenager with muscular dystrophy and women that sustained a brain injury in a car accident, all are made in the very same image of God. "The glory of God imprinted into the essence of human beings is absolutely central to the understanding of respect in relationships."²² An easy litmus test for this is to ask ourselves as a church, are we proud to call those with special needs a brother or sister in Christ? Their image of God is not distorted by a biblical understanding of disability. The distortion comes from our own

²² Hubach, *Same Lake Different Boat*, 46.

spiritual maturity and how we see those around us. New Christian parents standing over their baby sleeping in bed often have a feeling of awe of God's grace and mercy in creating this child in his image. But all children grow, change and challenge parent in many ways, that awe moment fades into the background of life is obstacles. So, to is the church, acknowledging all are image bearers of Christ. However, once challenges arise those images fade. As the awe fades within the church, people begin to look at others as troublesome, as a nuisance, faded now are those image bearers of Christ, and they have been replaced with problematic obstacles disrupting a worldview of selfishness. Spiritual maturity is a problem in any church but is amplified when the challenges of a special needs ministry are added.

Willingness and Sympathy

Christ designed Christianity to be sacrificial and for those that wish to follow him to also be servants to one another. Willingness in any form is an active process, so a lack of willingness and sympathy is clearly an active obstruction. Christians should do this because of our deep devotion to Jesus, as Paul states "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21). But, that spiritual drive has been lost over time, to serve one another takes a great deal of effort. With unwillingness as an active obstruction, anyone would prefer to be served, but that is not the calling of a Christian. SNF have an all-to-common pattern of people leaving them alone to deal with the enormity of a special needs life which is full of loneliness, fragility, and fright. It starts with understanding their needs and why SNF feel the way they do. Additionally, it is about showing the mercy and grace that Christ has shown us.

Husbands and wives that survive the strain a special needs life puts on a marriage, still have the struggles of others abandoning them during challenging times. Sadly, marriages do not last and fall apart because the weight of caring for a special needs individual who takes more attention and more energy than most can imagine,

leaving little left for a spouse. Emily Colson explains her experience, “Garry took a seat some distance away and refused to look me in the eyes. I could feel every muscle tense as I waited for him to speak after so much silence. I did not see it coming. I had not heard his subtle call for help... words fell from his mouth like molten lava.”²³ Spouses are not the only ones who abandon special needs individuals and caretakers, but also medical professionals do too. Hubach recalls a phone call from a friend:

“David’s bleeding profusely from the mouth, and we cannot figure out why!” Barb concluded that David had experienced a seizure and bitten his tongue [I]n the emergency room, the physicians said, “. . . there’s nothing I can do!” Translation: “We cannot deal with this!” David developed severe blood poisoning, then gangrene, and finally lost one-third of his tongue.²⁴

This story should outrage anyone who hears this story, yet this is one of hundreds, if not thousands of cases.

A SNF understands that the situation is difficult and that it is troubling to some, but they want people to help, they want people to hear their silent requests for help. The list of those that have done similar things to people goes on. The reality is, through these situations, the church has a unique opportunity to show these families a commitment to them and to their loved ones, that they have not felt in sometime. Each SNF will be different and have a distinct set of needs that they are willing to give others. The biggest hurdle in this respect is asking, letting them know that you are present. Not once, not twice but continually offering help, they will say no, until they think you are being genuine in your request. Asking is important but families do not want to make anyone experience the issues they deal with. So, asking sometimes is not enough, but instead planning something for them and then telling them about it, can be more effective. For example, telling a tired mother that she is being treated to a spa day and the only thing that needs to be known is when can you watch their child. Or, calling on the

²³ Colson, *Dancing with Max*, 48.

²⁴ Hubach, *Same Lake Different Boat*, 154.

way home from work and letting them know you picked up an extra pizza for their family and that you would like to know when you can bring it by. This is called an active ask; they still have the opportunity to turn you down if it is overwhelming to them, but they know that the motion of help is already in place. These active asks also show families that you are in the fight with them, that you are committed and not going anywhere. It all starts with understanding their feelings and finding the drive to meet their needs.

Showing the Same Mercy We Received

When a believer in Jesus Christ thinks of mercy they should be thinking of the kindness and compassion that God has given. Perhaps, the church has grown to accustomed to forgetting the mercy Christ has given us, because far too many times a believer is unwilling or unable to provide equal compassion and kindness. This active obstruction is in many Christians lives. Mercy, however, is different from sacrifices, a sacrifice is giving up something that a person is unhappy to give up. Mercy is something that comes directly from the heart and is filled with joy and gladness. Christ understood his role on the cross, he did not desire to be crucified, he even asked, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me” (Luke 22:42). Jesus understood the sacrifice that needed to be made, but it was through obedience that joy was found. As Hebrews 12:1-3 states

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Every Christian must be obedient in moments of sacrifices, but when it comes to serving others, the true heart of a believer is to be joyful in delivering mercy to others. “A church that is characterized by mercy is a church whose service to others is voluntary,

engaged, and personal. In other words, it is safe for the recipient.”²⁵ That statement is correct and one of the key words is engaged, it is active not passive. Hubach goes on to say, “mercy doesn’t stand on the sidelines and call out directions; it joins in the game and gets messy in the process.”²⁶ Getting messy also means opening to the possibility of sharing in a suffering that is not your own. That is mercy.

Grace shares similar features but is different in relation to how one sees others. When one sees an old woman trip and stumble it is graceful to help her, if someone needs a helping hand, it is grace that delivers it. Grace is given to those with difficulties, or a situation that is unimaginable. We give grace to those that are less fortunate than us, we give grace to those with disabilities that we can never imagine, and we give grace because God has blessed us with his own grace. Grace although broad in definition can be delivered with a precise blessing, or simply, a helpful hand. As Paul exhorts, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:4).

Conclusion

The church faces some legitimate obstacles ahead when it comes to starting a special needs ministry. If a church is willing to put effort into evaluating and finding these obstacles, the church can flourish. Knowing a church’s emotional obstacle can be a difficult process but the time it takes to assess and deal with such issues is not lost if it opens the doors to welcoming new families into a safe environment. Physical and financial obstacles are a realistic issue that many churches face. The reality is that every church can utilize some creativity and other resources to overcome these obstacles.

Last, dealing with spiritual issues within a church is something that every pastor experiences, regardless of knowing the spiritual issues a church may have can help bring forth resolution in bring a special needs ministry to the church. The church deals

²⁵ Hubach, *Same Lake Different Boat*, 161.

²⁶ Hubach, *Same Lake Different Boat*, 162.

with obstacles every day, even in simple everyday church activities, but it must fight to resolve them. If a church is willing to fight for the special needs community, the church will also find resolutions to these obstacles. Understanding obstructions is a key part of starting a special needs ministry and as Crystal Ours, a special needs director once said, “The perceived obstacle is not the special needs ministry itself, the obstacle is you.”²⁷

²⁷ Crystal Ours, phone interview by author, November 14, 2021.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS OF PROJECT

This chapter represents the culmination of the previous chapters in the form of a ministry project at Summit Baptist Church (SBC). Considering all the strengths and weaknesses of SBC, it was determined that a project aiming to guide the building of a special needs program through knowledge of the gap between special needs families and the church (chapter 1). The previous two chapters discussed the theological (chapter 2) and associated obstacles with this type of ministry (chapter 3) which are foundational to this project. This chapter outlines the planning and implementation of the project.

The purpose of this project was to establish biblical foundations for special needs individuals and families in the church and create a reproducible format for this ministry so other local churches can begin to reach their special needs communities. This was accomplished through surveys to better understand the needs of both the special needs community and the church, along with having a sermon series to outline the biblical needs to reach these families.

This chapter describes the details of the project in four sections. First, it explains the preparation for the project. Second, it provides an overview of the content of each sermon. Third, it describes the implementation of the sermons and dates. Fourth, it discusses the development of a reproducible format for special needs ministry.

Preparation

This project contains four main tasks in preparing for this project, which include: develop a “Special Needs Families Survey,” developing a “Survey for Church,” developing “Individual Church Survey” and creating a six-week sermon series.

Developing Special Needs Families Survey (SNFS)

A questionnaire was created to survey approximately one hundred special needs families and their relationship (or lack thereof) with a church. This survey asks about how the church conducted themselves regarding their special needs family member and how the church was able to or unable to meet their spiritual needs for both special needs individuals and their families (see appendix 1). The SNFS survey was given to special needs organizations and churches that had a wide variety of access to the special needs community. It was intended to be a one-time survey to strengthen the argument that there is a gap between the majority of churches and the special needs community. The argument postured in chapter 1, with regards to the gap between the special needs community and the church was verified and strengthened as a result of the surveys. This survey was also useful in helping to guide the sermon series and application, along with an appropriate approach when dealing with specifics for a special needs ministry. The survey included types of general disability and current church status questions. It allowed the participants to remain anonymous and no names were collected. The desire was to encourage those participating in the survey to be candid with their responses.

The first section was designed to understand the background of the participant. This section included three basic questions that was intended to provide a picture of the participants church background. These questions were multiple choice. Following questions were about the individual's, their type of disability and the age of the individual with a disability, along with their church background. All these questions are important to identify any significant obstacles they may have previously faced. For example, one of the questions asked the nature of the disability, with the understanding that many special needs individuals have multiple types of disabilities, like cognitive and physical, or physical and intellectual. Therefore, to help eliminate any misunderstanding one of the options was to select combination of disabilities. This helps to eliminate confusion of what should be selected.

The second section of the survey contained twenty-one questions, designed to understand the relationship between the church and the special needs families. Twenty of the twenty-one questions were based on six options to choose between: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Somewhat Agree, (4) Somewhat Disagree, (5) Disagree, (6) Strongly Disagree. The statements were evenly divided with fourteen statements where “Strongly Disagree” was the most desired response for those statements, and with eleven statements where “Strongly Agree” was the most desirable response. The fourteen statements seeking a “Strongly Disagree” response were statements based on false perceptions of special needs. The eleven statements seeking “Strongly Agree” were based on theological and practical responsibilities of the church. Additionally, there is an outlier with a simple yes or no question “do you currently attend church.” The reason this is important is to verify if there is any connection between the participants and a local church.

The project goals, methodology, and instruments were submitted to the ethics committee at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for approval on January 4, 2022. The project was approved for the use of human subjects in research on January 6, 2022.

Developing Church Assessment Survey

The second major phase of the preparation process for this project involved understanding the theology, and background of twenty churches. This survey asked about the demographic of their current congregation and the church’s future desires regarding special needs or disability ministry. The survey also asked how the church has ministered to special needs family members and individuals, how the church is able to or unable to meet the spiritual needs both special needs individuals and their families (see appendix 2). The *Church Special Needs Family Assessment (CSNFA)* was given to churches within the Southern Baptist Convention (22) and other denominations in the area (63),

throughout Colorado and several throughout the country. This survey was intended to be a one-time survey to strengthen the argument that churches lack the understanding of how to deal with these families and individuals. This survey helped formulate the understanding from the church's perspective regarding a special needs ministry and with the survey results from CSNFA. Therefore, the argument made in chapter 1 in regard to a gap between the church and the special needs community was strengthened and verified as this project will reveal. This survey was also useful in helping guide the sermon series and application, along with the approach when dealing with specifics in special needs.

The survey included questions about the number of current disabled or special needs individuals within the church and the intentions moving forward for a future ministry to these groups. It allowed the participating churches to remain anonymous and no names were collected. The desire was to encourage those participating in the survey to be honest with their responses.

The first section was designed to understand the background of the church. It provided three basic questions intended to provide a picture of the churches current and future plans. These questions were multiple-choice. There were two questions that addressed the church's current congregational status regarding special needs. Often, churches are drastically underestimating the number of disabled and special needs individuals within their church. The true intention of the questions was to force the church to think about what they see as special needs. Do they have any special needs individuals within the church, and if so, how many?

The second section of the survey contained twenty-five questions designed to understand the relationship between the church and the special needs families. All twenty-five questions were based on six options to choose between: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Somewhat Agree, (4) Somewhat Disagree, (5) Disagree, (6) Strongly Disagree. The statements were evenly divided with fourteen statements where "Strongly Disagree" was the most desired response for those statements, and with eleven statements

where “Strongly Agree” was the most desirable response. The fourteen statements seeking a “Strongly Disagree” response were statements based on any false perceptions of special needs. The eleven statements seeking “Strongly Agree” were based on theological and practical responsibilities of the church. The same divide was made to evaluate churches, and most important, assess how a leader within the church views both the perception of special needs combined with the biblical understanding of special needs. The reason this is important is to measure how an autonomous church witnesses, acknowledge, and is aware of the special needs community.

The project goals, methodology, and instruments were submitted to the ethics committee at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for approval on January 4, 2022. The project was approved for the use of human subjects in research on January 6, 2022.

Developing the Individual Church Survey (ICS)

The third major phase of the preparation process for this project involved understanding the theology, and background of seventeen individuals within SBC. This survey asked about the participants understanding of the demographic of SBC and the churches’ future desires regarding special needs or disability ministry from their experience within the church. The survey also asked how they perceived the church’s responsibilities to minister to a special needs family member or individuals and how the church is able or unable to meet the spiritual and special needs individuals and their families (see appendix 3). The criteria for this survey included that they must be a member of SBC and they must be in good standing with the church. This survey was intended to be given prior to the sermon series on special needs and a post- survey after the sermon series. Once the surveys both pre- and post-sermon series are collected and analyzed through using a test format, the results will show if the sermon series and biblical understanding of special needs has changed the responses of the survey. This

information can supplement the further development of a ministry through these foundations to reach the special needs and disabled community. The survey included seventeen members of SBC and ensured anonymity with the distribution of an automatically generated number for the participant instead of their name.

The first section was designed to understand the background of the church. It was given with three basic questions intended to provide a picture of the individuals understanding of the churches' current and future plans. These questions were multiple-choice. Several questions for the current congregational was designed to see how they identify and view special needs individuals and their families. The intention of these questions was for the participant to think about what they see as a special need, do they have any special needs individuals within the church and if so, how many? Often, church members are drastically underestimating the number of disabled and special needs individuals within their church.

The second section of the survey contained twenty-five questions, designed to understand the relationship between the church and the special needs families. All twenty-five questions were based on six options to choose between: (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Somewhat Agree, (4) Somewhat Disagree, (5) Disagree, (6) Strongly Disagree. The statements were evenly divided with fourteen statements where "Strongly Disagree" was the most desired response for those statements, and with eleven statements where "Strongly Agree" was the most desirable response. The fourteen statements seeking a "Strongly Disagree" response were statements based on false perceptions of special needs. The eleven statements seeking "Strongly Agree" were based on theological and practical responsibilities of the church. The reason this is important is to measure both the individual's perception of special needs and their spiritual thought process in regard to reaching these individuals and their families.

The project goals, methodology, and instruments were submitted to the ethics committee at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for approval on January 4,

2022. The project was approved for the use of human subjects in research on January 6, 2022.

Development of Sermon Series

The fourth major phase in preparing for this project involved the development of a six-week sermon series, designed to inform the church member on how the bible views our responsibilities to the special needs community. The sermon series was designed to be conducted over six weeks starting February 6, 2022, to March 13, 2022. The sermons (appendix 4) were then submitted, along with an evaluation rubric (appendix 5), to the deacon body at SBC on January 23, 2022. The deacons at Summit have served the church for many years and have a great deal of insight regarding the members. The deacons also have seen the special needs community in the area grow, and some of the deacons have members in their family that have a special needs. Therefore, their input on the sermon series was critical. In addition, the sermons were reviewed by three experts in special needs ministry. One, has led a special needs ministry in her church for over twelve years. Another has started a special needs ministry in her community that partners with local churches. The third was a special needs parent has been an advocate for the special needs community and church collaboration for over eight year. These three experts along with the deacon body provide incredibly valuable feedback regarding the sermon series. All scored the sermons high enough to approve it. The reviewers provided helpful feedback, with only minor changes needed on the sermon series.

Overview of Sermon Series

The sermon series was structured to begin with a wide view of the church's responsibility for these families. With later sermons narrowing in on specific aspects of the church's responsibilities. The first aspect given to the church was a challenge them to speak up for those that are in need, including those with special needs and disabilities,

based on Proverbs 31:8-9. Second, the church was challenged to understand the basic concepts on hospitality to those less fortunate, through Christ's example in sermon two (John 9:1-7) and sermon three (Luke 14:12-24). Third, the church looks deep into what Christ means by the Greatest Commands given in Matthew 22:34-40, breaking down the Old Testament understandings in sermon four (Deut 6:5) and sermon five (Lev 19:18). The last, concludes in the New Testament with sermon six in Matthew 22:34-40.

The basis of the sermons is simply intended to guide the listener through a biblical understanding of both the Old and New Testaments about how God looks at those with special needs. The listeners were continually encouraged to see these individuals and their families as those in need of the gospel and a church to help them walk through some difficult situations. Although they have different needs, we all seek the same thing—a saving faith in Jesus Christ. The listeners were encouraged to truly look at their own needs within the church and of those with special needs to ask themselves, “Why is the special needs and disabled community continually marginalized by the church when the bible clearly and consistently seeks those within that community to display the glory of God?” The church can be a great recipient of these individuals witnessing God's mercy to them through a ministry to them.

Sermon 1: “Speak Up” (Prov 31:8-9)

The first sermon delivered February 6, 2022, set the groundwork for the church to know their responsibilities when it comes to speaking up for those in need. The goal was to give examples throughout Scripture of the expectations of speaking out and what that exactly means for the church. The focus was Proverbs 31:8-9 speaking up for the mute, destitute and the poor and needy. The church learned that speaking up means both an active voice and being active listeners. While speaking up is the first step in being advocates for these individuals and their families, it was also to direct their attention to a

biblical understanding of speaking up based on both Old Testament and New Testament narratives.

For the purpose of this sermon, the definition of special needs was intentionally omitted. The intended purpose for the omission was to provide the opportunity for the listeners to formulate their own thoughts about the topic of special needs and consider what it means to them. An understanding was provided to the listeners about visible disabilities and invisible disabilities present in people's lives. The conclusion of the sermon left the listeners with a charge to "speak up for those without a voice." With three main points: (1) show love and care, (2) listen to them and seek to understand them, and (3) act by speaking up for them or help them when necessary.

Sermon 2: "For His Glory" (John 9:1-7)

The second sermon delivered February 13, 2022, was designed to give the hearers a better understanding of how Christ works with those that are disabled. During this particular sermon a definition of special needs and disabilities was stated as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment" given by the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division.¹ However, they were also given an understanding that all disability individuals require unique needs (or special needs) and all those considered special needs are categorized as disabled, therefore for the purpose of the sermon series these two concepts, (special needs and disability) and can be used interchangeably. Christ's understanding of suffering is critical *not* only to find the source of suffering but the purpose behind someone's suffering. Through which the church needs to learn hospitality to those in need.

¹ United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, "Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)," accessed November 21, 2020, https://www.ada.gov/ada_intro.htm.

The focus of this sermon was on John 9:1-7. During this sermon hearers saw the buildup of how Christ handles a man dealing with a disability and suffering itself. Determining that the cause of the disability was neither the sin of the man blind nor the parents, but the purpose was to display the glory of God through his disability. This is not a distortion of the bible's teaching of sin and suffering that is displayed in Leviticus, James, 1 Corinthians or original sin itself in Genesis 3. But it is to focus on what is the entire purpose behind suffering—is to give the person suffering a reliance on God, to give the person suffering a heart for those suffering and to give us a feeling of weakness before an almighty God, to display his glory in our lives.

The sermon concludes with another charge for the church to be welcoming and hospitable to those that enter through the church doors. With the understanding that the ultimate act of hospitality is seen in heaven with Christ. We the church are to “do the work of him who sent me [i.e., *Christ*]” (John 9:4; emphasis added) and provide the same hospitality to those seeking to find a place to worship their Lord and Savior as well. The sermon concluded with the understanding of why those with disabilities and special needs seek the church first. They want to be around other believers. Second, they want to be around those with generosity in their hearts. Third, they want a place to feel safe. The entire chapter of John 9 was devoted to this blind man, where Jesus states, “For judgment I came unto this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (John 9:39). Effectively, Jesus will give the blind, sight, he will give the sick, health. He will give those with special needs, relief, but for those that have easy access to the gospel yet do not accept it will become blind and will experience everlasting blindness.

**Sermon 3: “All Are Welcome”
(Luke 14:1-24)**

The third sermon delivered February 20, 2022, was designed to give the hearers an understanding of what it means to be hospitable to others. It sets the stage in

two ways; how to be good guest and how to be good host. To understand what Christ is trying to deliver in both the parable of the Wedding Feast and the Great Banquet, it was important to see these two categories within the church itself. Learning these critical concepts will help the church gain a better understanding of what hospitality truly means.

The first focus of this sermon was on Luke 14:7-11 the parable of the Wedding Feast. In this portion of the sermon the hearers saw that taking a prideful view of themselves and sitting at the seat of honor was an unacceptable approach to welcoming others. It should serve as a warning that pride can cause great shame in our future. On the other hand, humility will provide great rewards. Additionally, it served to demonstrate our great love and passion for Christ, where we are humble before him and exalted with him. Being disingenuous about the gospel is not humility; it is the opposite—gravitating toward the norms of the world instead of toward God. This entails the truth of our own belief and forces us to question if we truly gravitate toward the Word of God and what it says, or do we gravitate toward the world that is more inclined to provide the desires of our own heart.

The next aspect that the sermon focused on was the Great Banquet in Luke 14:12-24. It was seen through a Christ-centered hospitality approach. These aspects include we (the church) should not expect anything in return for those seeking to worship God. The second aspect of Christ-centered hospitality was to invite those that are different from us, not just our family and friends but those that look different and have different points of view. The last aspect of Christ-centered hospitality is to actively seek all for the Great Commission. No disability, no race, no special needs, no ethnic background should limit our passion for those to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Concluding the sermon was a charge to model being both a good guest and a good host through a Christ-centered hospitality model.

Sermon 4: “Love God” (Deut 6:5)

The fourth sermon delivered February 27, 2022, was designed to connect Christians’ responsibilities when it comes to loving God. It sets the stage in two different ways, first it reminds Christians of the saving grace that God has provided for us. Because of this saving grace, we as Christians are designed to love God in a unique way. Therefore, it is important for everyone who has a saving faith in Jesus Christ to recognize and reaffirm their allegiance to him by showing love with all of their heart, with all of their soul, and with all of their might. It is through this love of God that Christians will be propelled to acknowledge their commitment to Christ by our relationship with him.

This sermon was designed to help set the stage for the following sermon which is loving your neighbor. However, there is no loving your neighbor until you completely understand what it means to love God. Thus, the emphasis must be put on how we are to love God and do it through the means in which Scripture describes. Therefore, continuing to set up the understanding that God is our focus of love and exactly how we accomplish that love. Once this is done, we then can start understanding what it means to love others. Following Scripture, we must take our faith and love of God seriously to be effective in our love for others. This is something that many Christians overlook—what is the true meaning of loving God and how can it then be seen through loving others.

The sermon concludes with the understanding that none of us have the capability to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might without the saving grace of Jesus. In John 21:15-17 Jesus says to Simon Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Peter responded each time, “Yes Lord you know that I do.” Jesus responded to Simon Peter and said, “If you do feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep.” Jesus is saying that when Christ asks us, “Do you love me,” we should not be quick to answer with a yes, because one of our responses to loving Christ is how we treat others. One of the major aspects of loving Jesus is to make it a priority to love those around us as a part of our life, thus, foreshadowing the next sermon.

Sermon 5: “Hello Neighbor” (Lev 19:18b)

The fifth sermon delivered March 6, 2022, was designed to transition the congregation from what it means to love God, to love your neighbor as yourself. First, understanding what it means to love yourself is critical within this verse. To know how to love your neighbor starts with how we love ourselves. Built into all humanity is self-love. When someone is hungry, they eat. When someone is cold, they put on a jacket. When someone is in pain, they avoid it and so forth. None of these are in and of themselves sinful, in their actions nor their thoughts. However, having a keen understanding of what loving yourself is, can then help understand how to love your neighbor.

Second, acknowledging that we have two types of neighbors that are present in the world around us. First, there are those that we call neighbors, but we also call brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ said in John 13:35 “by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Loving our brother and sister in Christ is a command, not an option, and reveals the depth of our relationship with Christ. Coming to a saving faith in Jesus is only the beginning. Perhaps it is the easiest part of becoming a follower of Christ. Once salvation occurs, the new believer must display a love for other believers and a care for them, so that others may know that they are a disciple of Christ.

The second type of neighbor are those that do not have a saving faith in Jesus Christ. When asked about “who is my neighbor,” in Luke 10, Jesus explains the parable of the Good Samaritan. Where the hero of the story is someone that the Jewish community would have been appalled to have as their hero, the Samaritan. Jesus tells this parable of a man beaten, robbed, seen by a priest, a Levite and finally a Samaritan, yet it is the Samaritan who saw this man as a neighbor and cared for him. The conclusion of this sermon outlines three actions that the Samaritan took for the beaten man. First, he acknowledges the man and does not walk past him like the others. Rather, he sees him and has compassion for him. Second, he advocates for the man and does not simply see

and move past him, the Samaritan takes action to show him grace by helping him. Finally, he does whatever it takes for the man. The man needed medical care and rest. He stated to the innkeeper, “Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back” (Luke 10:35). He does whatever it takes. Special needs families experience a great deal of abandonment. If the church truly desires to succeed in this ministry, the church must continually “come back” to these families, with love and care for them. Showing a commitment to them, similar to that of the Good Samaritan. Loving your neighbor as yourself is simplistic in understanding albeit complicated in practice. These three actions are what we all must do, for those around us.

**Sermon 6: “The Greatest Commandment”
(Matt 22:34-40)**

The final sermon was delivered on March 13, 2022, and was designed to bring everything together from the previous five sermons. The previous five sermons consisted of passages pointing to the ultimate understanding of love. In Matthew 22, the lawyer wants to test Jesus about the traditions of Moses. Jewish traditions acknowledge Moses as a hero; and is the main hero in many of the Jewish traditions. This, of course, was always in anticipation of the Messiah. So, testing Jesus on the law could easily discredit him not only in front of the Pharisees but also in front of his followers. But Jesus answers the question with two commandments, one is found in Deuteronomy 6:5: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus said the second is like it, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). Jesus answers with potentially two of Moses’s most well-known verses to all the Jewish believers, then Jesus finishes by saying on these two commandments all the law and prophets hang, which is an incredible statement.

On these two simple commandments hang all the teachings of the law and prophets as Jesus stated. With the understanding that everything circles around loving

God and loving God's creation of man, we can begin to understand Christ's intention behind this comment. Although some could make the point that there is a great deal of variation between loving God and others, they all come down to these two commands. The Ten Commandments laid out by Moses are divided up into these categories already. Commandments one through four are all about loving God and how Christians are to express that love. Commandments five through ten are about loving others and how Christians are to express that love. The divine nature of love is our goal. Within that very goal lays the purpose of a special need's ministry.

When we look at special needs, we are seeking the very commandments of God. When we create such a ministry it, shows the love we have for God by glorifying his name to the poor, the weak the destitute (Prov 31), the blind, the lame (John 9), those in the streets, those beyond the highways (Luke 14). Such a ministry also shows love for those that are in need to hear the gospel following the Great Commission. These two commands are the essence for the reason behind a special need's ministry. With the conclusion of this sermon series the hearers were challenged to not only seek to love God and love one another, but to do it through a divine love, which looks different from anything else we might have called love. We are to love those with special needs, and we are to do so by providing them an opportunity to seek God.

Implementation of Sermon and Surveys

During the process of developing the sermon series potential participants for the survey were created. The criteria for these individuals were as follows: (1) They had to be an active member of SBC, (2) They must be willing to view all six sermons, (3) they must be able to exhibit a willingness to have an open mind regarding special needs and a ministry for them. Each participant received the "Individual Survey" (appendix 3) two weeks prior to the start of the sermon series, and they were instructed the survey was to be completed prior to February 6. With the original number of participants being

twelve, additional members asked to participate in the survey, taking the number up to seventeen. With word spreading, the interest in a special needs program grew; thus, the number of participants grew as well. The final number of the surveys taken were seventeen pre-sermon series and seventeen post-sermon series. It was critical to the study to accurately account for the gender gap that is present in caregivers. In a 2009 study the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP suggests that women are 66 percent of all caregivers.² With that understanding, the participants were split between 40 percent male to 60 percent female regarding gender and the age group ranged from eighteen years to seventy years old.³ There were approximately five individuals that have a disabled or special needs individual in their immediate family.

The participants were given the pre-sermon survey (appendix 3) between January 23 and January 30, with all surveys being returned the morning of February 6 prior to the morning service. The sermon series was scheduled to be conducted at the morning service on February 6, February 13, February 20, February 27, March 6, and March 13. During the service normal nursery and childcare was given as an option for the participants if needed. The service was held each week at SBC, in Wiggins, Colorado, with the average sermon length of 37 minutes.

During this time there were no additional meetings required for attendance. With the participants given anonymous status there was no gatherings or discussions during this time.⁴ After the last sermon was conducted, the participants were given a post-sermon survey, which was the same as the pre-sermon survey. They were encouraged to

² National Alliance for Caregiving, "Caregiving in the U.S. 2009," accessed March 10, 2021, https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/general/2011/caregiving-09-fr.doi.10.26419%252Fres.00062.001.pdf.

³ While 66 percent of women are caretakers in the home, that number increased within the special needs community; thus, having a higher number of females taking the survey gives a more accurate understanding of how special needs and the church function together.

⁴ The reason the participants were given anonymous status is address in chapter 5.

provide feedback of any kind on this survey and the sermon series in general. All seventeen participants were asked to and have completed the survey by March 27, 2022.

The process in which the sermon series was implemented was designed to help guide the listeners through the process of understanding God's design for the church and special needs. The order in which the sermon series was to be delivered was critical in this process because it was intended to walk the listener through the various levels of responsibility the church has to all individuals including disabilities and special needs. The process and order of the sermon series was approved by the deacon body on January 22, 2022.

Creating a Reproducible Ministry Plan

The fourth goal of this project was to develop a ministry plan to include special needs individuals and their families and welcome them to be a part of SBC as a whole. The ministry plan (appendix 7) was formed on March 23 and presented to the Deacon body on March 27 along with the evaluation rubric (appendix 8). The rubric asked the deacons to assess the goals, functionality, and actions steps of the plan. The deacons approved the plan on March 27, when over 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the level of sufficient. The deacons played an important role in evaluating the ministry plan, because of their expert understanding of the congregation. The deacons understand the culture of the church members, they are in continuous contact with their deacon families gathering critical critiques and affirmations of what direction the ministries in the church need to head. Additionally, the head deacon was a charter member of SBC forty-seven years ago, which makes him extremely qualified in understanding the members at Summit. He has seen every pastor come and go, he has seen all the ministry tactics in the church, along with the failures and success within the community. With his leadership and the other deacon's knowledge it was critical that they took a lead role in evaluating the ministry plan.

To develop this plan, the researcher contemplated the unique cultural, structural, and training barriers to members of SBC. The church calendar was also considered in the planning. The result was a plan with five goals to create and implement and “Inclusive Ministry.” These goals include, cultivating the correct culture, preparedness, training volunteers, invite and implement and keeping the ministry in the forefront.

Goal 1

The first goal was to cultivate a culture that is welcoming to those with disabilities and their families. One of the key components in creating an Inclusive Ministry is changing the culture of the church itself. The most effective way to do this is through preaching and teaching. When a preacher can communicate a biblical principle through strong preaching, the members of the church are far more likely to listen and be willing to take the next recommended steps. Therefore, not only was the sermon series between February 6, 2020, to March 20, 2022, conclusive, there will be an emphasis on the special needs ministry moving forward in future sermons.

The second part of this culture change is about having strong leadership from the top that supports a ministry of inclusion of all disabled and special needs individuals and their families. This becomes extremely important whether it is in a Deacon body or a set of elders that are driven by the Great Commission, the spread of the gospel and the ministries of the church. This is where the relationship between pastor and other leaders becomes critical. At SBC, the body of believers know the heart of this ministry and the power behind it.

Goal 2

The second goal was designed to create preparedness. Creating a preparedness for any individual that might come into the church that deals with issues in special needs and disabilities. There are three phases of preparedness in this ministry, the first is a

preparedness of organized opportunity within the church itself. This means the issues that were raised in chapter 3. Knowing your church's perception from a special needs' vantage point is important to be able to identify potential obstacles. So therefore, going through and knowing these areas of difficulty is critical in preparedness.

The second phase of preparedness results from the willingness of church members to be trained in a special needs Inclusive Ministry. In this training, volunteers are taught the distinct types of special needs, types of sensory issues, how to deal with these issues, and most important, talking with special needs families, and their parents. The third and final phase is to create a welcoming environment for these families. This includes what SBC have termed "door to door care." Door to door care is defined as the concept of welcoming people when they enter the doors of the church, ensure they feel cared for during their time within the doors, and finally, caring for them as they depart through the doors. This includes having good welcomers empowered to recognize a person or family with special needs or disability. Within the walls, we provide a sheet for caregivers or parents to fill out. This sheet provides information about their family member and how they prefer we handle them while they are in our care (appendix 9). Last, it is about making sure we have met their needs during their experience at our facility. This process concludes as they exit the church doors with a friendly volunteer following up later about on how their visit experience was and if the church can improve upon anything during their next visit.

Goal 3

The third goal was all about training volunteers, which is done concurrently with preparedness. A select number of volunteers are needed to make this ministry possible. These members were willing and able to handle the wide variety of special needs and disabilities. There were two phases of training, the first focused on understanding special needs and disabilities. In this training the volunteers were informed

on the types of special needs and disabilities they might face, how to communicate with these individuals, how to communicate with their caregivers or parents, and how to handle some common situations. The second phase focused on the physical needs of these individuals. What are common obstacles churches face when ministering to these families, and how the church intends to remove or limit these obstacles. Volunteers will be trained in recognizing special needs, identifying obstacles for those disabilities (shown in chapter 3) and working to eliminate or limit those obstacles.

Goal 4

The fourth goal was to invite and implement the Inclusive Ministry. With culture, preparedness and training accomplished the next focus is to turn to the people themselves. It is not hard to find people with special needs or disabilities. Many associations and groups are easy to find and contact. One of the most powerful aspects of the special needs community is word-of-mouth both positive and negative, therefore the church must strive to be on the positive side of those conversations. Special needs families will always be quick to tell other families about their experiences, with doctors, schools, nurses, and churches. The first three goals are exponentially important prior to this stage. Creating a good ministry from the start will help it grow from the beginning with minimal disruptions. In the creation of this ministry, all elements must be looked at to make the best possible opportunity for those with special needs and their families to experience worshipping Christ and to connect with other believers.

Goal 5

The final goal was to keep the Inclusive Ministry in the forefront of the congregation. One of the major challenges with a ministry such as an Inclusion Ministry is that it gets lost and forgotten about without a continuous reminders and updates to the congregation. This may be accomplished in two main ways. The first, is to make sure that the ministry itself is highlighted often. This could be accomplished through consistent

bulletin updates regarding the needs of ministry leaders, or exposure of the special needs families and individuals to the church through education and introduction to them and their special needs. This illustrates the level of importance and communicates that this ministry is a priority to the leadership and should be to the members of the church. This emphasis focuses on the importance that an Inclusion Ministry provides. This will continually encourage families and individuals with these special needs that the church is staying focused on this ministry, and they are not being overlooked.

The second way that this ministry should continually be brought to the forefront is by providing special updates, within the context of announcements at the beginning of Sunday morning services, like those that are given by missionaries and missions the church is involved in. The current way the SBC is looking to provide this kind of update is through a video message at the beginning of a service once a month. Although this was not a fixed schedule, and a video update can be made at any time for any reason determined by ministry leaders. Providing testimonies with workers, parents of special needs individuals, or even special needs individuals themselves can prove to be a powerful tool for the ministry. These testimonies can not only uplift the congregation but would also serve as an opportunity to seek volunteers that need inspiration to join the ministry. The focus of such an update is to provide the members both stories, successes, needs, and the future of this ministry. Like missions, the focus is to show why continued support is imperative to this ministry. Making sure that the ministry is continually brought before the church for encouragement, reminders and updates is a vital part of the success of this ministry.

These goals are the starting point of any church creating a special needs ministry. Every church will have different obstacles or variations of the above goals that need to be taken into consideration as they move through the process. Working toward this ministry can become overwhelming at times due to the constant updating of diagnoses and the wide range of levels of special needs. The overall objective of these

goals was to find the least resistive environment and path for those dealing with special needs to come to church. With this overall objective in mind, any church has the capability to find, create, and implement a ministry intended to reach the special needs community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to create a practical reproducible ministry plan in guiding churches to reach the special needs community. This chapter discusses the steps that were taken in this endeavor and creates the course for the future development of this ministry plan. The process this project went through was designed to bring people through a spiritual journey of what the bible teaches about ministering to those less fortunate. Additionally, it was designed to paint a picture of responsibilities, that the church, its leaders, and the members have when it comes to ministering to the special needs community. The next chapter reviews and analyzes the evidence that this project goals were met and provides some additional conclusions to reflect upon.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

Learning from this project can only come from a deep evaluation of where God has blessed this project and where mistakes can and should be improved upon. This final chapter details both the successes and weaknesses of the project, as well as provide a reflection of what has transpired over the last two years. The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the project by answering basic questions regarding the project success in meeting its goals and purposes, as well as the strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, this chapter explores what I might have done differently knowing what I know now. I also explore what future work is recommend at Summit, and by summarizing the theological and life lessons learned in summary.

Evaluations of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to create a reproducible model for churches in creating a special needs ministry. This was done by creating a sermon series about special needs and the church, evaluating surveys from special needs families, churches, and members of SBC. The evidence below demonstrates that the project fulfilled its purpose.

Creating a Sermon Series

The first aspect of this project was to create a sermon series consisting of six sermons. The sermon series was designed and approved by the deacon body at SBC on January 24, 2022 (appendix 4). The six sermons were successfully executed from February 6, 2022, to March 13, 2022. During the process, seventeen individuals participated in a pre-sermon series and a post-sermon series survey. Thirteen of the seventeen individuals attended in-person for all six sermons. The remaining four

participants used the option of watching the sermons they missed online. All participants were asked to watch all six sermons in sequential order prior to filling out the final survey. They all verified that they viewed all sermons in sequential order and all six sermons were viewed as instructed.

Selection Group for Survey

As part of the process, a select group of individuals were asked to participate in a pre-sermon series and a post-sermon series survey. The demographics of these individuals varied with a wide range of ages, gender, and special needs experience within their immediate families. The purpose of the survey was to determine the level of interest for a special needs program and their level of understanding of the obstacles between a church and special needs family. The evidence in their growth in understanding was shown through the survey results. In the pre- and post-surveys, a place was provided for the participants to make comments and share anything they learned or wanted to learn through the series. A few excerpts from the pre-survey responses are as follows:

1. "I really have no idea where our church is concerning special needs."
2. "People with disabilities can be disruptive but the church can learn how to work through it."
3. "I believe our church is welcoming but lack a specific plan and goals in knowing how to address special needs."
4. "I believe our church is unsure how to help."
5. "I think it is easy for the church and non-church members to be judgmental toward those with disabilities. Especially, if there isn't physical evidence of a disability."

These responses are typical responses from members of any church and any denomination. Therefore, the responses in the post-survey indicated that the sermon series was beneficial to these individuals. Here are some excerpts from the post-survey responses:

1. "An individual with a disability and special needs are no more distracting than a new born baby crying."

2. “Our church . . . is accessible to anyone with physical needs and special needs.”
3. “Special needs families should feel comfortable for in-person worship services.”
4. “My responsibility as a Christian should be more understanding of families with special needs.”
5. “Our church seems to be moving in the right direction in helping these families.”

Thus, the sermon series at a minimum left the participating individuals with a feeling of growth and motivation toward a special needs ministry. The next step in the process was to assess whether or not this growth truly increased their knowledge and understanding in all areas the survey touched on.

A comparison of the pre- and post-sermon series survey results indicate that the participants had a better understanding of the obstacles between the church and SNF and comprehended the responsibilities as a Christian. The evidence that supports this was seen with the pre-survey mean score was 52.7 as compared to the post-survey 56.7 mean score. Fourteen participants increased their mean scores. Additionally, the overall total score increased by one hundred, with ten individuals increasing by more than eight points.

A focus on several of the scores for specific survey statements reveals that the participants better understood their responsibilities and the obstacles. Table 1 below highlights four specific statements with an increase of more than ten points:

Table 1. Top four increases in the post-survey results

Statement	Pre-survey score	Post-survey score	Increase
People with disabilities are difficult to handle within the church (S1).	60	74	14
The church does not have the resources to meet individuals with special needs (S9).	50	64	14
Special needs is distracting to other during service (S21).	48	64	16

Statement	Pre-survey score	Post-survey score	Increase
The church and its members do not know how to minister to special needs individuals and their families (S23).	41	52	11

It is important to know that the four statements that had the largest increase were primarily about the ability of the church to meet the needs of the special needs community. For example, S1 is a perspective response about the difficulty some special needs have, and S9, S21, and S23 all relate to resources and ability of the church to develop a ministry with these individuals and their families. The increase in these areas suggest that equipping people on a special needs' ministry should start with correcting the negative perception of both the individuals and the church's ability to meet their needs.

The understanding of what it takes to create a special needs ministry is further seen in additional statements where a minimum increase of seven points between the pre- and post-surveys. These increases are the next highest evident in the statement response. Table 2 below illustrates these three statements.

Table 2. Three increases in the post-survey results

Statement	Pre-survey score	Post-survey score	Increase
People with disabilities ask to much of the church (S5).	30	37	7
People with a disability should not be allowed in church (S12).	19	27	8
The church is uneasy with creating a special needs program (S17).	48	55	7

Both tables above show a significant increase in knowledge can come from a well-rounded sermon series designed specifically to address some of these false perceptions and to detail the responsibilities that Christians have to this community. In terms of a pure dismissal with this community as seen in S2 “People with a disability should consider utilizing our online services at home” and S5 “People with disabilities asked too much from the church.” It was already a low score, and the hesitation came from unknown factors of special needs. Post survey comments about this question ranged from “what if we get someone with aggressive autism?” to “how can people learn about special needs with the wide range of diagnoses?” However as seen throughout this process overcoming such obstacles comes through a determination and reliance on God’s sovereignty and grace. Knowing individual responsibilities as Christians became vital in overcoming the worldly perceptions of special needs and further encouraged them to fulfill the calling that God has given them.

Table 3. Two decreases in the post-survey results

Statement	Pre-survey score	Post-survey score	Decrease
People with an intellectual disability are mentally ill (S4).	90	88	2
People with a disability are disruptive (S6).	72	71	1

With these survey scores completed, it became clear that the sermon series was successful in changing attitude toward a special needs ministry. There are two exceptions where the survey reveals decreases in the survey results (see table 3). The potential reason for the drop in these two statements was that they were never specifically addressed during the sermons. Mental illness and intellectual disabilities are often equated to one another (S4), and although the sermon did not directly address this issue,

it was implied on several occasions. S6 which address the disruptive nature of some special needs behavior and how the church must find ways to handle and cope with such disruptive behavior, which also showed a slight decrease, most participants likened it to a child being disruptive or a baby crying. S4 decreased by two points where S6 decreased by only one point. Although the decrease was slight, it also shows the importance of covering all issues presented within a special needs ministry. The decrease itself did not significantly influence the end results, however, it does demonstrate the essential need for a broad variety of topics that must be discussed.

Developing a Reproducible Ministry Plan

The second part of the purpose was to develop a reproducible ministry plan. With the evidence of a successful sermon series, coupled with leadership determination to see this ministry come about, a reproducible ministry plan was created, designed, and approved (appendix 7). While the complete details of this plan are fluid in nature based on different churches and each one's unique obstacles, it has become clear that this plan can be a success. This plan is currently in its execution phase at SBC. The details of the reproducible plan have been detailed in chapter 4 (creating a reproducible plan). As SBC continues to work through the plan more evaluation of the plan and its effectiveness will be ongoing. As one deacon noted, "I was glad you did this series and I found it very helpful, and I cannot wait to see where this takes the church." This particular ministry is not one that can be seen through a lens of a few years, it is one that must be seen over decades, and success is in its longevity. Only over time will the success of this ministry be seen, and through the efforts of everyone involved.

The creation of a reproducible ministry plan was only part of the success of this goal. For complete success, this plan must be accepted, applied, and implemented in other churches. Therefore, after the plan was created, five pastors evaluated the plan to see if it was a viable option for their church. The reproducible plans were emailed to the

pastors on May 18, 2022. The overall feedback from the pastors was clear: if the congregation of these church moved forward with this plan, they would follow the instructions of the plan given. Here are few excerpts from the pastors who reviewed the Ministry Plan:

1. “The difficulty is how to relay this information to the congregation, but it is a need in our community.”
2. “The truth is we simply do not reach this group of people; this plan provides a great starting place for our church.”
3. “Knowing my church and the members, they would love to get involved with this ministry but never knew how to get started, this plan seems to cover all the basic steps to get a ministry going.”
4. “I cannot understand why we missed this so easily, I would make some minor adjustments to fit my church but otherwise it seems plausible for us to consider this ministry.”
5. “I would like more information regarding this Ministry Plan, I really would like to present it to our church.”

Four of the pastors suggested that they would like to discuss this further and potentially partnering with Summit to help implement this plan. One pastor has already begun the process of evaluating his churches obstacles addressed in chapter 3. Two pastors have asked for a discussion regarding the sermon series, which they are given flexibility on Scripture and style they choose to use. With the creation of a reproducible plan in conjecture with the feedback from these pastors, the purpose of this project was successfully fulfilled.

Evaluation of the Project’s Goals

The next evaluation that must be made was whether or not the project’s specific goals were successfully met. The project had four goals. The first goal was to assess special needs families in our community and establish their needs. The second goal was to assess how local churches are interacting with special needs families and are they actively seeking them as a lost people group. The third goal was to develop a sermon

series designed to inspire members of SBC and the community to reach the SNF for the glory of God. The fourth goal was to develop a ministry plan using the first two goals to address the spiritual and physical needs of SNF from a biblical perspective. All these goals have successfully been accomplished based on the methodology section found in chapter 1. Below are the detail showing the success of each goal.

Goal 1: Assess SNF in Our Community and Their Needs

Goal 1 was designed to assess the special needs community and their needs, along with their assessment of the church’s reliability in meeting their needs. The survey was mailed out to three organization/associations that advocates for special needs and their families. Two of these organizations were local to the state of Colorado and one survey was given to a national organization. One hundred fifty-seven surveys were sent out and sixty-four have been returned at this time. Additionally, the surveys had a full completion rate of 92.1 percent, which means that every question was answered in fifty-nine of the surveys. The remaining five left one questions blank, the question that asked for a description of their family members disability. With 40.7 percent of returned the goal was successfully met based on the methodology in chapter 1, that the required number of returned surveys had to equal no less than 50, therefore this goal was successfully met.

Table 4. Goals successfully met

Surveys sent	Surveys returned	Methodology for success
157	64	50

Goal 2: Assess How Local Churches Are Interacting with SNF

Goal 2 was designed to assess local churches and their ministries and interactions with the special needs community and the churches' pursuit of them as a lost people group. The church survey was sent to eighty-five churches, with twenty-two of the eighty-five surveys sent out to Southern Baptist churches. The return on surveys was a total of twenty-one churches, eight of which were Southern Baptist churches. The completion rate for this survey was 95.2 percent with only one church leaving off one question, which means twenty churches answered all the questions. The remaining church answered every question but one, which was the question regarding the number of special needs individuals currently at their church. Although the return rate was disappointing, there was an anticipation that this survey would yield a small return rate. With this in mind, the adjustment for the low rate of return was to send out additional surveys to compensate for the low return rate. Although the return rate was only 24.7 percent the successful threshold was twenty returned surveys, therefore the goal was met.

Table 5. Surveys sent and returned rate

Church surveys sent out (total)	Surveys sent to Southern Baptist churches	Returned surveys (total)	Surveys returned by Southern Baptist churches	Methodology for success
85	22	21	8	20

Goal 3: Develop a Sermon Series

Goal 3 was to develop a sermon series that clearly displayed biblical foundations for reaching the special needs community and creating a ministry, which was delivered from February 2 to March 14. Surveys were given to seventeen participants to see the effectiveness of the sermon series. A pre- and post-survey was given and

collected with the intention on evaluating (appendix 3) the success of the sermon series in making an impact on those listening. These surveys measured the participants' background, understanding and knowledge of the relationship between the special needs community and the church. Part of this goal was successfully seen through a t-test for dependent samples that demonstrated a positive result, statistically significant difference between the pre-sermon and post-sermon series survey scores: $t = -2.5, p < .01$. score. The deacon body which was helpful in the formation of the sermon series scored the sermon rubric. The second need for success was based on the sermon rubric score of 90 percent or better, which once evaluated was 100 percent (appendix 5), therefore this goal was successfully met.

Goal 4: Develop a Ministry Plan

Goal 4 was to develop a ministry plan to address the spiritual and physical needs of SNF was evaluated by the expert panel of four individuals on April 8, 2022. These four participants consisted of individuals with family members with special needs and they are devoted Christians, who have a wealth of knowledge and experience to identify the issues between the church and the special needs community. Based on the research methodology this goal needed to score 90 percent on the *Ministry Plan Rubric* to be considered a success (appendix 8). After review and some adjustments made the expert panel determined that the *Ministry Plan Rubric* score was 100 percent. Therefore, this goal was met. In addition, to verify that this Ministry Plan can be reproducible in other churches. A group of five pastors received, reviewed, and provided feedback regarding the ministries ability to be implemented within their church setting. The details of these five pastors' responses are under the developing a reproducible plan. Although, there seems to be a strong interest in the plan, the truth is that until this plan is implemented and examined, true success cannot be measured until a follow up is reviewed a year or more after the initiation of the plan.

Strengths of the Project

Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of this project is the next question that must be answered. There are four main strengths to this project. The first strength was the spirit of the purpose. The purpose of this project is to establish biblical foundations for special needs individuals and families in the church. Additionally, to create a reproducible format for this ministry so other local churches can begin to reach their special needs community. In other words, the spirit of the purpose is to minister to this particular community, which required some difficult, but honest feedback from both the special needs community and the church. Honest feedback was received from both sides, this feedback was valuable, yet it was hard to hear as both a pastor and a special needs parent myself. Therefore, everyone acknowledges that the mindset for each other was clear and if there are avenues in repairing and implementing a stronger relationship between the church and the special needs community the dedication would be there. Focusing on God's Word is the beginning of this commitment and establishing biblical foundations. Again, the spirit of the purpose is to create a reproducible format and gain more traction as the project moved forward. During this process of this project special needs families began inquiring about the ministry, churches asked for updates, and signs of a renewed relationship between the special needs community and the church became evident and palpable. Therefore, the strength started with the spirit of the purpose and continued to expand and grow at each level, with everyone understanding the need for such a ministry.

The second strength of this project was the goals, which reinforced the purpose. The goals were designed to build upon one another; the first two goals became vital to the remaining two. The first two goals simply investigated the needs and commitment on both sides of this conversation. The response from the special needs community was overwhelming at times, both filled with excitement and fear. The church response was not as extensive, but the ones that did responded continually sought updates

and looked for ideas regarding a special needs ministry. With the establishment of the need based on the first two goals, the remaining goals of a sermon series and developing a ministry format became more of a desire for everyone involved. Therefore, the goals which were intentionally built upon one another, became some of the most important steps toward this ministry.

The third strength of this project was the development of a sermon series. The sermon series was also built upon one another, with the hopes that each week a new biblical foundation would be revealed, and the conclusion of the sermon series would bring everything together. The first sermon was designed to remind Christians to speak up for those in need and not to be complacent with our own lives. The second and third sermons, outlined Christ's ministry of healing the disabled and special needs. It also reminded Christians that God's grace includes everyone that will call upon the name of the Lord. The fourth, fifth and sixth sermons, described what it means to love God and love each other. Walking through each aspect individually and finally as a whole to demonstrate Christ's understanding of both loving God and loving your neighbor. The fluid nature of the sermons going from responsibilities of a Christian—to what Christ has done for those dealing with disabilities to how we are to love God and others was a critical piece of displaying the need for this ministry. This ministry is not one built on hope, it is built on action and love. Knowing the biblical foundations for this type of ministry became a vital, yet crucial step in building a ministry format. The sermon series did just that.

The fourth strength of this project was the interest that it generated within the church and the community. The interest was built on two levels. One the members of SBC and those that participated in the surveys. Two, those that are special needs families that found themselves answering a survey that had them reevaluate their spiritual walk. As mentioned previously, the mindset of everyone involved was genuine and became more unveiled as the project moved forward. As one individual stated in a post-survey

comment, “Even if this ministry doesn’t start right away, I am so happy that the conversation has started.” It is through this interest that this project was strengthened at each step.

Weaknesses of the Project

This project certainly had strengths, but it additionally had some weaknesses. The first weakness was the length of the sermon series was too short. Unknown factors such as: congregational interest in the subject, those not participating in the survey attention and the ability to keep everyone engaged with special needs as the subject matter was the reason a six-week sermon format. Once the series was designed and in process, it became clear that the series was going to be successfully attended and the interest level grew. However, at this point to add additional sermons would have upset the balance that was designed from the beginning. Therefore, the determination was made to continue with the original design of a six-week sermon series. The effects of not having a longer sermon series was a missed opportunity to add more biblical evidence and biblical foundations to support the formation of this ministry.

The second weakness was a lack of interaction with those taking the *individual Church Assessment Survey*. Initially, the intention was to keep everyone anonymous, so everyone would feel comfortable with full transparency and honesty. Although, transparency and honesty were accomplished, it came at the detriment of discussion among one another. Many responses from the survey, would have been beneficial topic within a small group. When weighing the benefit of discussion versus transparency and honesty it was determined to not be a priority. In hindsight, this was a missed opportunity that could have increased many factors for the participants. The opportunity for informative and productive discussions to facilitating tough questions in a group have the potential to provide dynamic interaction. Future groups and conversations will be organized to foster those types of topics and conversations.

What I Would Do Differently

Upon reflection, there are three things I would do differently if I possessed the knowledge I have now. First, I would increase the collection period for special needs families (deliver by organization) and church surveys. Originally, I gave eight weeks for surveys to be returned, with a flexibility of an extra two weeks. Instead, I continued to receive surveys for an additional fourteen weeks with the final survey arriving twenty-four weeks after the documents were originally sent out. By that point, the information on the surveys was already calculated and logged. With this new knowledge of the actual response time, I would consider increasing the survey time from ten weeks to sixteen weeks. This would have allowed the collection of the majority of the surveys and allowed for more extensive data toward the matter. That said, even with the additional surveys not included within this project statistically, I reviewed the last summations and discovered that the main conclusions did not change. In fact, the late data only reinforced the final output at the cutoff point with these additional survey responses.

The second change I would make is to create a larger survey group at SBC. The group consisted of seventeen individuals with a wide range of ages, gender, and special needs connection. I think it would have been helpful to find a minimum of eight to thirteen additional participants, to increase the population sample from SBC and create a higher level of confidence in the analytics. The group was limited to help ensure the individuals ability to be present, listen to every sermon, and to be transparent and honest with a difficult topic like special needs. Despite the challenge to find extra people, the data supports that this extra effort would have been worth the time and difficulty to manage. I am grateful and appreciate those who took the time to provide valuable feedback during this entire project.

The third change I would make is to have concurrent small group discussions during the sermon series. The group could have consisted of the same seventeen members taking the pre- and post-surveys. The challenge to maintain transparency and honesty in

the surveys would be the main concern. Additionally, the question of how often they would meet and with how many small groups are valid points to consider in the future. In hindsight, a well-organized small group discussion could have been valuable to gain more feedback, posing an opportunity for a stronger swing in the survey results. Although this would have taken a substantial amount of time and effort it would have been a great benefit if done well.

Ideas for Future Special Needs Ministry

Understanding both the excitement and obstacles of this project did open future ideas related to the topic of a special needs ministry. These ideas were not included in the original plan for two reasons: (1) to keep the focus of this project from getting too broad, and (2) an unknown factor with the level of anonymity for those participating in the project via the survey or the panel. In either case, the observations of the data provide an opportunity to explore further ideas in the future.

The first idea for the future is to create classes surrounding the issue of special needs and a ministry designed for them. This would allow for in-person questions and answers, it could also allow for concerns about other needs that surface during discussions. The more I considered the notion of more classes, it became clear that the bible has a vast array of Scripture that could facilitate an understanding of this ministry. The more a person can understand what God has truly done for us can inspire us to make sure we do everything we can for others. Adding an in-person class can help gain further credibility in creating this type of ministry. With all in-person classes an organized structure must be put in place to have the most efficient flow of conversation and topics.

The second idea would be to have a class focused on specific special needs and other common disabilities in which the church serves. Several comments on the post-survey response surrounded the idea that special needs are different and how the church could address each issue. "Is there a difference between how we would treat someone

with downs syndrome and someone that is autistic?” “Meeting specific needs of every special need seems daunting, does the church get specific or does it have general rules?” These are great questions that should be answered and need to be addressed in a classroom setting. Of course, there are differences between special needs yet understanding them, and how the church should respond to them must be addressed. This would be a beneficial classroom discussion. The second idea for a classroom is different from that of the first. The first idea was designed for the church and its purpose, the second would be more about understanding the lives and function of those dealing with special needs. Knowing the life of someone’s needs can facilitate changes not only in a person’s life but the life of the church as well. These are just a few classroom topics that should be discussed.

The third idea would be to find those that are most passionate about this ministry and equip them to run this ministry. The more people become equipped, the more we can learn from one another to provide a positive impact. Equipping those to run this type of ministry requires a certain level of love, patience and understanding of the special needs community. If someone genuinely loves this community, it could create an avenue for them to seek a ministry that will bear much fruit. Attracting passionate people into the ministry could also provide excitement and marketing value to support this ministry. Word-of-mouth, special events, and other ministry outreaches can spark a long-lasting relationship between the church and this community. Some of the most passionate people work diligently to make ministries a success. Because of their passion and convictions this ministry could grow and flourish.

Theological Reflections

At the onset of this project, I was certain that the Old and New Testaments called for the church to witness to all the world, including special needs and disabled individuals. The overall theological understanding that Scripture provides for us, was a

significant insight into helping those that need help. My studies did not disappoint in this research, nor was I short on a biblical understanding of what it means to be a Christian. As I studied, I found myself continually coming to Matthew 22 and Jesus's response to the lawyer about the "Greatest Command." Which in turn led me to Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and additional scriptures about loving God and loving others.

With Jesus's response in Matthew 22, I could have easily moved to Matthew 28 and the Great Commission, but I went deeper into Matthew 22 and worked to understand God's purpose in this passage. Why, at this point, would they attempt to challenge Christ on the Greatest Command? What was the purpose? Although the clear notion is the attempt to discredit Christ, the more amazing factor was the wisdom within Christ's answer. Not just one command but two, not just Mosaic law but the call to disciple the world, not just simple obedience, but a heart that is pure both for God and others. Christ's answer and theology behind that answer could not be contained in a single sermon. A single sermon would have been an injustice to Scripture and would have fallen short in fully understanding the passage. Therefore, from the passage found in Matthew 22, five additional sermons arose that not only highlight and illustrate Christ's point, but they would also provide a progressive understanding of our responsibilities as Christians.

With Matthew 22, the focal point of this series, it became clear that starting in Matthew would not create a strong enough context to one passage. Clearly, Scripture reveals itself from Old Testament to New Testament and from particular revelations to the next, it was congruent with the same approach I planned for the sermon series. I would start with the call to speak up for those in need (Prov 31), then turn to two passages where Christ exemplifies speaking up for the needy (John 9; Luke 14), and closing with a closer look at the commands Jesus mentioned in Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. In my opinion, closing with the overview of Matthew 22 was critical as it tied everything together with a clear message supported by Old and New Testament

passages. Finally, the challenge to understand why loving God and loving our neighbor ties into each other and all the law is a call to action. All of these sermons presented in the order in which they were presented in this series brought forth a deeper understanding of a special needs' ministry, and clearly displayed God's grace is for all.

Last, everyone sees special needs individuals as different whether they are a believer in Christ or not. Many see them as flawed and in need of repair. This is a worldly perspective and not a Christian holding to biblical principles. Jesus Christ's healing ministry was continuous throughout. This project brought me to a renewed conclusion. All humanity suffers with flaws, with abnormalities, and a special need. Sin is that abnormality, and Christ is that need. As I reviewed the definition of disability by the US government, "A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment,"¹ I realized, sin fits this definition as well. Sin is a *spiritual impairment*, which limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment (as we all do with sin), or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment (all sin and fall short of the glory of God). Sin is in everyone's nature, sin is in everyone, and sin is who we are. Death is what we deserve based upon our sinful nature. Neither sin nor death is something anyone can overcome. Our need is a Savior, our need is one that can defeat sin and overcome death.

We need assistance to have a relationship with this person—a person that has not experienced sin directly, a person that has overcome and defeated death. We need Jesus. As we seek a ministry to minister to those with special needs, we must not forget that we are in this category as well. Whether it is Down syndrome or pride, autism or

¹ United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, "Americans with Disabilities Act (1990)," accessed November 21, 2020, https://www.ada.gov/ada_intro.htm.

gossip, cerebral palsy or adultery, ADHD or envy, seizure disorder or gluttony, all need a Savior. When we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, we are cleansed. Our flaws remain until we stand before him in heaven, but we are reborn. Those with special needs deserve to feel that same cleansing, and although their special need remains, they too will stand before Christ, perfect, because he is perfect.

Personal Reflections

I would be remiss if I did not dedicate this project to my dear son Ezekiel, who is one of the most important individuals in my life. It was through his experiences and the experiences of my family that brought about this notion of special needs and the church. I continually fight past experience that did not end well. I thank my Savior Jesus Christ in keeping myself and my family committed to the church despite these negative experiences. In turn, I never desire a person with special needs, disability, or any other issue to come into a church where I am pastor and find it to be cold and heartless as my family has experienced. I may never reconcile the past experiences. However, I will never regret my intentions to love those that need Jesus. Pain will be felt, pain has been felt, but the joy will overcome, and Christ will be victorious.

As both a special needs parent and a pastor, stress is part of everyday life. Many reading this project may be able to attest to the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual demands of ministry. Many reading this may understand the toll a special needs child puts on the parent, family, and all involved with their care. But few understand the demands that both have. As a special needs parent, I understand the pressures of each day, I understand the moments of nervousness, of anxiety and the cold sweats that one breaks out in when you attempt a new thing, a new place, and a new church.

As a pastor, the obstacles for such a ministry are clear, they are highlighted in my mind. The task of discipling and leading those that do not have a special need is already overwhelming and difficult. To add a ministry with a great deal of work and

effort, which has no standard of success rate in local churches, seems daunting. However, working through this project has been something more than a means to ministry. Rather, it has also been an experience of exhausting hours and time, which has fulfilled my dedication for all to hear the gospel of Christ. I pray that the blessings of this project bear fruit for both pastors, churches and the communities who need to connect with a church.

This project was more than intimidating at first, knowing there was little literature available that could reflect my personal ideas and thoughts. But through a great deal of prayer, support from my wife and family I pushed forward to find a comfort in both Scripture and the church that I currently serve. Scripture provided comfort knowing that God has truly designed us as individuals and as a church to seek and serve those with special needs and disabilities. My church has shown me that despite little to no background or knowledge of special needs, many people are willing to learn and seek the glory of God through special needs. It has been a true honor to serve the church, the special needs community, and my Lord during this project.

Conclusion

The thought of concluding this project only provides me with hope for the future. This project was a success. It was able to attain all of its purposes, especially to create and develop a ministry plan moving forward. In addition, all of the goals were successfully completed. Every success, every goal and every accomplishment should be attributed to God and his glory. I am grateful for God's wisdom, patience, and passion in this project. I am grateful for the professors, advisers, editor, and seminary staff who have provided me with guidance at every opportunity that I needed. I am thankful for the theological, sociological, and practical knowledge that Southern Seminary has provided to me during my education experience there.

As I look toward the future, I see that there is still much work to be done. Today, a new plan is in place, a strategy moving forward, and ideas for future

exploration. With the grace of God and faithfulness to serve him, I am certain of God's sovereignty for this ministry.

APPENDIX 1

SPECIAL NEEDS FAMILY SURVEY

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to better understand the relationship between the church and the special needs community. This research is being conducted by Jeff Paschall for the purpose of determining the level of connection the church and special needs community has with one another. In, this research, you will be asked a series of question about your church background and the churches theology and commitment to the special needs community. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.* By your completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Part 1: Background

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

1. What is the nature of your family member's disability?
 A. Cognitive
 B. Physical
 C. Intellectual
 D. Combination

2. What is the age of the family member with a disability?
 A. NB-5
 B. 5-10
 C. 11-15
 D. 16-20
 E. 21-30
 F. 31-40
 G. 41-50
 H. 51-60
 I. 61 and over

Part 2: Church Involvement

1. Do you currently attend a local church?
 Yes
 No

2. Have you left a church because of their inability to manage your special needs family member?
 Yes
 No

Directions: Answer the statements below based on the following scale, circle the option that best represents your agreement with the statement:

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat,
AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

1. The church was unable to meet our needs as a special needs family	SD D DS AS A SA
2. The church was frustrated/annoyed with our presence	SD D DS AS A SA
3. The church could not handle the physical needs of our special needs family member	SD D DS AS A SA
4. The church could not handle the emotional needs of our special needs family member	SD D DS AS A SA
5. The church could not handle the cognitive needs of our special needs family member	SD D DS AS A SA
6. The church could not handle our family members "tics." i.e., twitches, movement, or sounds	SD D DS AS A SA
7. The church could not handle our family members inability to sit still	SD D DS AS A SA
8. The church had no modification for your family member	SD D DS AS A SA
9. The church was too much of a routine change for you family member	SD D DS AS A SA
10. The church did not offer childcare for your family member	SD D DS AS A SA
11. The church did not have a bathroom accessible for your family members needs	SD D DS AS A SA
12. The church asked you to stay with your family member during service	SD D DS AS A SA
13. The church could not modify music volume for our family members needs	SD D DS AS A SA
14. The church stated they had no one qualified to take care of your family member	SD D DS AS A SA
15. The church could not handle the special circumstances surrounding my family members needs	SD D DS AS A SA
16. The church seemed unwilling to help us (family) grow spiritually	SD D DS AS A SA
17. I was unwilling to leave my family member with a someone I did not know	SD D DS AS A SA
18. I felt anxiety when my family member was not with me	SD D DS AS A SA
19. I cannot do special events at the church because they never plan for the needs of my family member	SD D DS AS A SA
20. My trust in the church to care for my spiritual needs and that of my special needs family member is very little	SD D DS AS A SA

APPENDIX 2

CHURCH SPECIAL NEEDS FAMILY ASSESSMENT

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to better understand the relationship between the church and the special needs community. This research is being conducted by Jeff Paschall for the purpose of determining the level of connection the church and special needs community has with one another. In, this research, you will be asked a series of question about your church background and the churches theology and commitment to the special needs community. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.* By your completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Part 1: Church Background

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

1. Does your church currently have any special needs families in the church?
 Yes
 No

2. How many families with special needs do you currently have?
 A. 0-5
 B. 6-10
 C. 11-15
 D. 16-20
 E. 21 and over
 F. Unknown

Part 2: Church Engagement

1. Does your church have a plan if a special need individual comes to the church?
 Yes
 No

2. Does your church intentionally engage with the special needs community?
 Yes
 No

3. Does your church desire to engage with the special needs community?
 Yes
 No

Part 3: Churches Theology Toward Special Needs

Directions: Answer the statements below based on the following scale, circle the option that best represents your agreement with the statement:

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat, AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

1. People with a disability are difficult handle within the church.	SD D DS AS A SA
2. People with a disability should consider utilizing our online services at home.	SD D DS AS A SA
3. People with disabilities are similar in needs.	SD D DS AS A SA
4. People with an intellectual disability are mentally ill.	SD D DS AS A SA
5. People with disabilities ask to much from the church.	SD D DS AS A SA
6. People with a disability are disruptive.	SD D DS AS A SA
7. People with a disability cannot be independent from their family.	SD D DS AS A SA
8. The church is unwilling to change diapers of adult special needs individuals.	SD D DS AS A SA
9. The church does not have the resources to meet individual with special needs.	SD D DS AS A SA
10. Physical disabilities and intellectual disabilities are the same thing.	SD D DS AS A SA
11. The Bible teaches us how to care for people with disabilities.	SD D DS AS A SA
12. People with a disability should not be allowed at church.	SD D DS AS A SA
13. People with a disability can be a part of all ministers.	SD D DS AS A SA
14. God asks us to love those with a disability.	SD D DS AS A SA
15. Churches will be held accountable for how they treat people with disabilities.	SD D DS AS A SA
16. People with disabilities are made in the image of God.	SD D DS AS A SA
17. The church is uneasy with creating a special needs program.	SD D DS AS A SA
18. The church needs to reach families with special needs but do not know how to start.	SD D DS AS A SA
19. The church would be willing to have a special needs and disabilities ministry if they had guidance and a plan.	SD D DS AS A SA
20. The church needs to be better at addressing special needs family needs.	SD D DS AS A SA

21. Special needs is distracting to others during service.	SD D DS AS A SA
22. Special needs is difficult for the church and its members to understand.	SD D DS AS A SA
23. The church and its members do not know how to minister to special needs individuals and their families.	SD D DS AS A SA
24. The church has to many obstacles in providing a special needs ministry.	SD D DS AS A SA
25. The church ultimately is responsible for reaching the special needs community regardless of obstacles.	SD D DS AS A SA

If you have any questions or comments, please write them below:

APPENDIX 3

INDIVIDUAL CHURCH ASSESSMENT SURVEY

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to better understand the relationship between the church and the special needs community. This research is being conducted by Jeff Paschall for the purpose of determining the level of connection the church and special needs community has with one another. In, this research, you will be asked a series of question about your church background and the churches theology and commitment to the special needs community. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.* By your completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Part 1: Church Background

Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer.

1. Does your church currently have any special needs families in the church?
 Yes
 No

2. How many families with special needs do you currently have?
 A. 0-5
 B. 6-10
 C. 11-15
 D. 16-20
 E. 21 and over
 F. Unknown

3. How long have you attended Summit Baptist Church?
 A. 0-1 Year
 B. 2-3 Years
 C. 4-5 Years
 D. 5-10 Years
 F. 10+ Years

Part 2: Church Engagement

4. Does your church have a plan if a special need individual comes to the church?
 Yes
 No

5. Does your church purposely engage with the special needs community?
 Yes
 No

6. Does your church desire to engage with the special needs community?
 Yes
 No

Part 3: Churches Theology Toward Special Needs

Directions: Answer the statements below based on the following scale, circle the option that best represents your agreement with the statement:

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat,
 AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

1. People with a disability are difficult handle within the church.	SD D DS AS A SA
2. People with a disability should consider utilizing our online services at home.	SD D DS AS A SA
3. People with disabilities are similar in needs.	SD D DS AS A SA
4. People with an intellectual disability are mentally ill.	SD D DS AS A SA
5. People with disabilities ask to much from the church.	SD D DS AS A SA
6. People with a disability are disruptive.	SD D DS AS A SA
7. People with a disability cannot be independent from their family.	SD D DS AS A SA
8. The church is unwilling to change diapers of adult special needs individuals.	SD D DS AS A SA
9. The church does not have the resources to meet individual with special needs.	SD D DS AS A SA
10. Physical disabilities and intellectual disabilities are the same thing.	SD D DS AS A SA
11. The Bible teaches us how to care for people with disabilities.	SD D DS AS A SA
12. People with a disability should not be allowed at church.	SD D DS AS A SA
13. People with a disability can be a part of all ministers.	SD D DS AS A SA
14. God asks us to love those with a disability.	SD D DS AS A SA
15. Churches will be held accountable for how they treat people with disabilities.	SD D DS AS A SA
16. People with disabilities are made in the image of God.	SD D DS AS A SA
17. The church is uneasy with creating a special needs program.	SD D DS AS A SA
18. The church needs to reach families with special needs but do not know how to start.	SD D DS AS A SA

19. The church would be willing to have a special needs and disabilities ministry if they had guidance and a plan.	SD D DS AS A SA
20. The church needs to be better at addressing special needs family needs.	SD D DS AS A SA
21. Special needs is distracting to others during service.	SD D DS AS A SA
22. Special needs is difficult for the church and its members to understand.	SD D DS AS A SA
23. The church and its members do not know how to minister to special needs individuals and their families.	SD D DS AS A SA
24. The church has too many obstacles in providing a special needs ministry.	SD D DS AS A SA
25. The church ultimately is responsible for reaching the special needs community regardless of obstacles.	SD D DS AS A SA

APPENDIX 4

SERMON SCHEDULE AND TOPICS

The Sermon Schedule and topics are designed for the deacon body to review and express their option and desire of any changes that may need to be made based on rubric in appendix 5.

Sermon Schedule and Topics

Sermon 1: February 6, 2022 - Proverbs 31:8-9
Title: Speak Out

Sermon 2: February 13, 2022 - John 9:1-7
Title: For His Glory

Sermon 3: February 20, 2022 - Luke 14:7-24
Title: All Are Welcome

Sermon 4: February 27, 2022 - Deuteronomy 6:5
Title: Loving God

Sermon 5: March 6, 2022 - Leviticus 19:18b
Title: Hello Neighbor

Sermon 6: March 13, 2022 - Matthew 22:34-40
Title: The Greatest Command

APPENDIX 5

SERMON SERIES EVALUATION RUBRIC

The following rubric was used to evaluate the sermon series developed by the author and delivered to the congregation at Summit Baptist Church described in the “Goals” section of chapter 1.

Sermon Series Evaluation Rubric					
1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Accuracy					
Each sermon was sound in its interpretation of Scripture.					
Each sermon was faithful to the theology of the bible.					
Scope					
The content of the sermon sufficiently covers each issue was designed to address.					
The sermon sufficiently covers a biblical pedagogical methodology.					
Pedagogy					
Each sermon was clear, containing a big idea.					
Each Sermon provides application for participant regarding the material.					
Practicality					
The sermon clearly details how to develop a lesson to teach the Bible.					

At the end of the series, participants will be identifying better the relationship between special needs and the church.					
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APPENDIX 6
SERMON TRANSCRIPTS

Sermon Transcripts are provided for reference to the teachings of each topic. They are designed to interpret Scripture and provide the listeners a better understanding on how Scripture teaches us to care for special needs individuals and their families. Transcripts are edited for readability.

Sermon 1: Proverbs 31:8-9: Speak Out

As many of you know we are going to take a break from our series in Genesis on February 20th of this month coming up will be a year into it so we are almost there, but we are going to take a little break for now and we are going to approach a subject for the next few weeks that is near and dear to my heart

See most parents and families when they are expecting a new child are ready and eagerly awaiting for that new arrival not just the new arrival itself but in their minds begins to formulate these future plans like what color are we going to paint their bedroom? How are they going to interact with their older siblings? What kind of toys or outfits should we buy for them when they are tiny? But then the unthinkable happens they have a doctor come and end say to them in some form or fashion something's wrong with your baby. Stephanie Habauck wrote in her book "Same Lake Different Boat" "the pediatrician entered my room and after a brief introduction announced we believe that Timothy has a chromosomal abnormality she said I remember feeling dizzy and disoriented as the words the physician spoke were being spoke through a funnel from another place"

Why do you get that feeling?

Why would anybody get that feeling when they realize that their child might be disabled or have a special need?

That is because our perception of special needs and disabilities has been distorted throughout history throughout history people with disabilities and special needs have been marginalized, they have been hidden away like an unused aspect of society.

They have been institutionalized, they have been denied education, and they have been experimented medically on, they have been subject to discrimination with employment, housing, transportation and sadly within the church itself.

So today you might think that I am really advocating for my son Zeke and although that is true, I also am here because I have talked to literally hundreds of special needs families and they all have an experience with the church, most of them have been unpleasant.

So, I am not here strictly on behalf of Zeke, I am here on behalf of those that have what I call an invisible disability, which is those disabilities that are not physical, you cannot see it immediately, but they still are there on a daily basis so special needs and disabilities they struggle with obstacles we do not as “typical individuals”

They have stressors and anxieties that we would find normal and unimportant, they suffer from extreme pain whether it is emotional, physical, or spiritual. This is not simply about experiences with Zeke but with many special needs families and so the history of it says disabilities and special needs are of no value to society. Yet we see throughout history people have had amazing impacts on the world:

- Stevie Wonder transformed music in many ways.
- Helen Keller showed that anyone has the ability to learn.
- Beethoven composed some of the most epic music in all of history after he was deaf.
- A kid once in school, could not pass a single grade, was overactive, could not sit still for a moment, had such difficulty learning, later won 23 gold medals in swimming. That is Michael Phelps.

- Franklin D. Roosevelt, a man in a wheelchair, became President. He took America out of the Great Depression and led them through World War II. He once said these words, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

So, church, this is what I am asking—that today we realize that special needs and disabilities, we have nothing to fear but fear itself. Special needs individuals have changed the world and yet they are still marginalized and dismissed today.

[At] a church Rebecca and I once attended, we walked into church right after Zeke was born. The church, talking to the nursery said, “Here is Zeke he has Down syndrome,” but the person looks confused. She finally asked, “What do I do with him?”

We said, “The same thing you do with every other baby—he is not mobile, you lay him in a crib, and talk to him, pray with him, and discuss things with him.”

We have been told that if we wanted to attend the church BBQ that we would have to take Zeke out of the nursery because, ‘we cannot handle him that long.’

We have been told, “If you would be much easier on us as a church, if you just brought Zeke to service, and did not leave him in the children’s area—”

He was not invited to children’s church because he was “too disruptive—”

One day, we picked Zeke up from a Sunday school class. He was bleeding pretty significantly from one of his legs. They said, “We do not know what happened, he must have done it to himself—”

So those are our experiences but I am not going to give experiences of other people that I have heard from because that is *their* experience. These are just our experiences and so yes, my heart is for Zeke, but it is also to help us understand Christ and our responsibilities as a church to these individuals.

Because the church, for whatever reason, has drawn a line in the sand, says, “Do not cross this line because it is uncomfortable for us, we do not want to deal with it, it is too much to handle” —when I read a passage like this passage in Proverbs 31:8-9, it gives me confidence, it gives me hope, because of not only a parent of a child who special needs, but a pastor who desires to be inclusive with these individuals.

Let us read Proverbs 31 first and then we are going to discuss it. Starting in verses 8 and 9:

“Open your mouth for the mute for the rights of all who are destitute open your mouth judge righteously defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank you. Open our hearts and our minds to learn what you would have for us today. We do not give any hesitation on what that means. We thank you Lord. In Jesus’s name I pray. Amen.

I think in this particular passage you will have three responsibilities to look at as a = church now. These verses are really about a mother telling her son, a king, what is expected of a king. The rest of Proverbs 31, verse 10, is on the virtues of a good woman, that is what Proverbs 31 is known for. But these first nine verses are a mother telling a king how to conduct himself as a leader. What we have are phrases stacked on top of each other: the mute, the destitute, the poor, and needy. This is telling us exactly for whom the king is supposed to advocate. We see the mute—this is someone with no ability to talk—literally unable to speak. This can also be used as a figure of speech for someone who has no access to power or ability to make change because of their position. This [verse] is often used for the children in the womb—the unborn nonverbal—but if

you know Zeke, he is nonverbal so this is him. He is unable to speak. That is true with so many disabilities and special needs. They cannot express themselves appropriately, they do not know how to express their emotions, so they in effect, become incapable of speaking up for themselves. Children do not know what to speak up for—they have no idea. “I have lived with this all my life, what am I speaking up against?” and “I do not understand, I do not realize what to do?” This also goes for the families of a freshly newborn, special needs child or disabled child because they get paralyzed by the moment. This parallelization in speaking with people can last days, weeks, months, years, or even decades for some parents.

To say “all those who are destitute” literally, the word means sons of passing. This is a desperate situation, these are people desperate, near death, surviving, struggling to survive, and still surviving. The poor and needy, because of their poverty, cannot meet their own needs. As a church, we must be able to find ways to speak up for them. Both the parents, the families, and the individuals themselves.

Now, because this passage is used in a very pro-life type of passage, I need to clarify something. God does not look at pro-life in a vacuum—okay? He does not look at pro-life in a vacuum, we are strongly pro-life, but it can be misunderstood in a lot of ways—particularly people that claim to be pro-life. They misunderstand what that means because being pro-life we mean “from womb to tomb.” It is not one or the other, it is *BOTH AND*—that is where pro-life becomes misunderstood. God does not look at it in a vacuum. God is pro-justice; he says everyone outside of the womb has to be righteously treated.

A quick Hebrew lesson—the words—”all that are destitute“—do you know what that word all can translate into? It is *all*, it is not ‘some,’ it is not ‘those that we are comfortable with,’ it is *all*, so we are to model God and to be Christlike. We are to not be single minded—what is the most moral injustice in our time? Abortion! Yes, but it is a very close second to *not speak up for those that do not have a voice*. See, we effectively shrink our hearts when we look at pro-life in a vacuum, we shrink our hearts to only focus on that one issue, so I am asking that we see the issue of disabilities and special needs differently, because as a church I have seen it; you walk in through the doors, and they [visibly] cringe. They look at it [the disability] and they get nervous, and they are unsure

I spoke with a pastor just the other day who told me something: “We do not do special needs because it is really rough on me.” I said, “Listen, two statistics I can give you; first, divorce rates with these couples that have a disability, or a special needs child increases to 23 percent, and second, abortion rates increase because we can detect everything before a child is born these days increases by 92 percent of Down syndrome children. For those tests that detect Down syndrome, and 50 to 85 percent increase with other detectable disabilities.” With just those two statistics alone, is not the church in a prime position to be there for those people? That is exactly what we would fight for in all areas; with *all* people, so we are in a prime position, are we not?”

Psalms 103:6 says, “the Lord works, righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed,” if that is true then why is the church oppressing people that are right in front of them. To be Christlike we must fight in the same manner as God would fight, we cannot fight every battle I agree but we have to fight in the right place at the right time.

How are we fighting for anybody if we cannot even engage the community we are trying to speak up for? We should be welcoming them, loving them, caring for them. Church, if we do not open our mouths, we are in effect, oppressing the same people we should be reaching.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.”

The first responsibility of a church and perhaps the most important, is to speak up by displaying love to the special needs community and by showing the parents that their child is made in the image of God. There are two kinds of sins that churches can make in this area. One is actively oppressing them by asking them not to come back. I have a list of about fourteen special needs families that have had that happen to them. Oppressing people that are actively trying to seek the opportunity to worship of Jesus Christ and asking them not to come because it is too disruptive to our worship style.

Now, the second sin here and I think, which is what Proverbs 31:8-9 is effectively saying, is that silence for the mute, the destitute, the poor, and the needy is in fact a sin. When we do not speak up for those that need to be spoken up for, the “silence sin” is where the church rests.

I believe wholeheartedly that no matter what the child has, no matter their disabilities, they deserve to hear the words, “Do you know that Jesus died for you on the cross?” “Do you know he rose three days later defeating sin and death for you?” I tell Zeke that all the time. Zeke deserves to hear those words and so does every special need and disabled person. Yet special needs people crave the gospel. They crave it because they understand it more than most people do. The psalmist said in 139:13, “For you

formed my inward parts you knit me together in my mother's womb." *Does the church believe that? Does the church exemplify those verses?*

I have been asked this question, "how do you know that it is not just a sin issue and that is why they have become disabled or special needs? In Exodus 4:10-11, Moses is telling God, he is slow with the tongue. God said, who has made man's mouth? Who has made him mute or deaf, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?"

The Lord is taking credit right there for *everything*. Sin entered the world. Yes. And that [sin] has caused great deal of imperfection in each and every one of us. He is saying that all of those imperfections, including disabilities, including special needs, are affected greatly by sin, but *I* [God] made it [the imperfection], I made man that way. I love them and care for them. Sin has distorted things, but it is I the Lord that continues.

Christians and people all over think that special needs is undesirable. They are something held at a distance but that is not how God sees it. God sees it in Isaiah 40. He says, "He tends his flock like a shepherd, he gathers them in his arms, and carries them close to this heart." See the church can be helpful, they can help families see the beauty of the child dealing with disabilities or special needs. When they do that, the glory and the splendor of God's grace is shown. [To] speak out can mean a lot of different things. First, it has to be loving to them and showing them that they are in the image of God.

"Speaking out" by the way, is not a "hashtag advocate" to see. I am not going to advocate for you by being really cool on social media. That is not speaking out—it is not about looking good. But instead, it is about when you see somebody and talk with somebody that has this situation in their life, and you say to them, "Our church will walk

alongside you and help with this. In fact, it would be even better if you said, “I will help you and walk with you in this situation.”

“Your child makes too much noise.” That is okay! Jeff’s on a mic we can turn him up. You want to be involved in a church ministry, but all the churches do not want to deal with their child. We will figure out a way here. Your special needs individual wants to be involved in a ministry. We will be inclusive and accommodating because that is what Christ has asked of us.

Special needs families will never look like the good guys, by the way, because people will say, “They are asking too much” or “They are demanding too many things.” How can they ask that of a doctor? How can they ask that of a school? How can they ask that of a church? They will always look like the bad guys.

I want us to understand this when we learn from Christ, we can understand things Christ told us in three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is an account of him healing a woman suffering from issues with bleeding and hemorrhaging. The woman would be considered unclean and had a massive stigma about her. Jesus looked at her and says, “Daughter your faith has healed you, go in peace and be free from your suffering.”

In Matthew 8:1, Therefore, a man with leprosy comes to Christ. What does Christ do” He reaches out, touches the man, and heals him. *Jesus reaching out and touching him*, leprosy was very contagious, and the lepers had their own towns and colonies that they were shoved into. But Jesus reaches out and touches him [the leper]. It was shocking but the man’s courage to go to Christ was also shocking. He could have been imprisoned or he would have been put to death. For him to actually go into the crowd and be touched

by Jesus was encouraging. Special needs families, it takes courage to come the church, it takes courage to get up and say, “I am going to deal with this issue today and I am going to have other people witness all the issues I am going through.” That takes courage. The man with leprosy shows that, and Jesus Christ, he is forming his healing ministry right in front of us. Which, he is unconcerned with people’s appearance, with their illnesses, their afflictions, or any other taboos that they may have. Rather, Jesus is interested in the healing of people and showing him as a Son of God. How does he do that? He provides comfort and hope in an uncomfortable and a hopeless world.

There is no mistaking Christ’s intention; whether it is a man with leprosy, a woman that is deemed unclean, a deaf mute in Mark 7, healing the man with dropsy in Luke 14, or healing a paralytic man in John 5. Christ was never concerned with some outward abnormality. Rather, he was concerned with the person’s belief in him as a Son of God. Life is messy and sometimes Christians need to get involved to help in that mess.

I was on the phone the other day with a lady who leads a ministry in Tennessee. I was trying to get some information from her and she told me, “I have to call you back, we are heading to the hospital after six months of my daughter’s ailment, I have been telling them the same thing, I have been telling them, it is this issue, we need to test for this, we need to test for this, and they have gone 100 different directions, and finally they tested her yesterday for what I said it was, and guess what—I was right.” See this happens all the time because doctors, schools, and the church—they all want to look at special needs and disabilities like a cookie cutter issue. Zeke does not talk but his receptive speech, which means he can take in and understand what you say, is high. They have considered it, they have tested it, it is substantial, and that is why he needs to be told Jesus loves him,

that is why he needs to be told the gospel over and over again. That is true for special needs families and they are their own individuals.

A few weeks ago, we talked about Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. I would like to read that again if you do not mind, and just look at verse 7 to see the next aspect of responsibility of a church:

“For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven,
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant a time to pluck up what is planted,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to break down and it is time to build up,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn a time to dance,
a time to castaway stones and a time to gather stones together,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to seek a time to lose,
a time to keep and a time to castaway,
a time to tear and a time to sow,
a time to keep silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.”

Did you hear that in verse 7? A time to keep silent and a time to speak? Now, why do you think a time to be silent is before time to speak? A parent, a mother, or father, or guardian will love their child that is special needs. They will do anything for them, and in

many cases they already have. But the other aspect that we must understand, and is our responsibility, is that we have to listen to them. We have to be active listeners so many times. The Bible talks about being active listeners, do you remember in 1 Kings 3? Two prostitutes get pregnant and have children. Tragically, one of them dies, the other prostitute steals the others' child. They take their issues before the King. After listening to both parties, King Solomon decides and says, "Bring me a sword, cut the child in half." Why did he say that? Because he listened to them, and he realized that the real mother would never let that happen. Another example is King David in 2 Samuel 12. A woman comes and throws herself before King David and says, "King David, my husband has just passed away, my two boys have fought, one is killed the other and now the one that survives is in trouble. Please save us both." King David says, "Not one hair on your son's head will fall to the ground." King David listened. That is a lesson for the church again. Once again, the judge, or in this case, the King listened to the person's needs. Far too many times, a church anticipates without listening.

Another issue with listening about and learning about special needs families when you listen, you learn about the families. A lot of special needs parents have other kids that are not special needs, and those children often get overlooked or overshadowed because of the constant care required for the special one. The church can listen and step in to be a part of that. More than ever, with the King, he is listening to his mom. The time to speak up is *now* for the special needs family. Time to speak up when the child is being treated with disrespect, and without love.

The church needs to recognize these issues that are in society. With the voices of the parents, as a church, it is time to speak up on behalf of all of them. For the unborn, the

disabled, the special needs, the destitute, the powerless, the poor, the needy—the time to speak up is *now*.

Because, if we truly want to be a church that claims life is from womb to tomb that must be without question the very nature of those born with disabilities are those we should be trying to reach. My desire is to have a ministry—an Inclusive Ministry—which has parents with special needs families. If they want to get involved in something, we will make accommodation for them and we will figure it out. We will be inclusive, then we will make it happen, in any event, in any ministry, and for all that Christ has for them.

Church must learn to speak up and speak out. Sadly, the church has not done anything inside the church walls. The people that get upset, nervous, and scared about special needs, need to understand what Christ did. He came for the sick and the unhealthy. He did not come for the healthy.

This brings us to our last responsibility. We must act when action is appropriate. Life is messy. You have to jump in sometimes. We have to speak out by loving them first, by listening to them, and taking appropriate action. The irony here is that those three things, loving them first, listening to them, and taking appropriate action? Those are the same steps you would take for *everybody*. That is the irony, it is no different. I get calls all the time during the week. What do I do? I listen to them, I love them, and I try to show that all the time. But I *listen* to them. I hear their issues. If needed, I take appropriate action and that goes for *everybody*.

The reason we should not fear disabilities or special needs is because there is nothing different in our interaction with them. The only difference is the actions that we have to make *for* them. The accommodations might seem more severe, more drastic, but

that is the difference; let us not just speak up for them or speak out but let us be there *for* them and *care for* them, because they do not have a voice.

Now I will leave you with this. If we truly believe all these individuals are in God's image, if we truly believe that, then it is our responsibility as a church to take steps to be accommodating to them, we do not want to be silent nor do we want to be oppressive.

As we pray and as we continue on this series we have started here, the first thing we have to understand is that the first thing we have to be is *vocal*. That is the first thing we have to do. As we go through this quick series, we are going to understand what God has guided us to and how to do just that.

Let us Pray: God, we thank you for the blessing, thank you for the love you have shown us today, and we thank you for those individuals in this room who are dealing with discipline or special needs. We ask for your grace, we ask for your help, Lord. Open up our hearts, our minds, and make us willing to do what you have for us. We are so blessed, and we are thankful that we are all created in your image. Amen.

Sermon 2: John 9:1-7: For His Glory

Turn with me too book of John Chapter 9.

Today is text I think is a little heavy and I think it is that way because far too often they are people that do not like what it actually means or what it actually says. I am including that churches and pastors and other leaders they do not want to speak to what it means, but today we are not going to avoid the meaning because I think the lesson within these verses are far too important to avoid.

Before we get started, I want us just to sit here for a moment and think that humanity in general wants to know the cause of issues in life. They want to understand what is behind things and although that is not a bad thing, it is not a sinful thing, it is one that could lead you astray in your understanding of God's Will in our lives. I think that is important to understand because I think this passage helps us to zero in on really what we are looking at and what the cause/effect of things are in this passage.

You are going to see three parties:

1. You are going to see the blind man,
2. You are going to see Jesus, and then,
3. You are going to see the disciples; specifically, the one that asks the question.

With that being said I think God insight here ultimately will show his glory, but it also walks us through our own minds thought process. So, if you will join me, we are going to read this passage in two different sections, first we are going to read verses 1 through 3

“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth and his disciples asked him rabbi who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind Jesus answered it is not this man sinned or did his parents, but the works of God might be displayed in him.”

Ok so in these passages we are going to see these three parties emerge and when we see these three parties emerge what is our first observation?

Our first observation is the blind man, he is blind that is an easy one, he is a man so he is not a child that is also easy, and he is been blind from birth. That is probably what Scripture means by a man blind from birth, but that is the easy part, but I think there is significance here.

Then from Jesus really quick we see that Jesus saw the blind man, he saw him, and he drew attention to him, it is this is not the disciples that noticed him, it is not the blind man that heard Jesus walking by, then calls him over. No, it was Christ that saw him and then the disciples in verse two they ask relatively simple question, right? Who sinned this man or his parents, and so when we look at these first two verses before we jump into Christ response let us evaluate those just a little bit more?

The blind man knowing he is a man tells us that his parents are no longer caring for him, even back in those days a child that had a disability would have been cared for by the parents up to a point but at some point, they turned him over and he becomes a beggar to meet his needs. Now we meet his parents in verse 20 where people do not believe that Jesus healed him, so they take him to his parents and say is this your son and they say yeah but he was blind last time we saw him and so that is where we meet his parents. But I think it is critical to understand where the blind man is and for that we got to understand the context of where Jesus was at the end of Chapter 8, we are just going to go a few verses back starting in verse 57 “so the Jews said to him you are not yet 50 years old, and you have seen Abraham, Jesus said to him truly I say to you before Abraham was I am. So, they picked up stones to throw at him but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”

So, the blind man was right at the temple’s edge where beggars sit that is significant, that is important because we know since he was blind, he is a beggar and he needs others to provide for his needs, he needs others to help him survive.

So why does he have to go to the temple why go to the temple

1. Because beggars know that at the temple there will be crowds, more opportunities for their needs to be met, more opportunities for people to give them what they need to survive.

2. They also know that they will have a more generous crowd. Whether it is because only devout believers go to temple or whether it is because they know that the people are going to feel guilty from their own sins and so part of their repentance will be to give to the poor and the needy and so whatever the case maybe they are in a spot of generosity.

3. They are in a place of relative security at the temple, this blind man is susceptible to being robbed, beat up, killed and so if somebody gives you something you want to be in a place that is less likely for that to happen. A little bit of protection around him, people of kindness, of care that that are not going to rob him or kill him.

Why is that important because I think we have to ask ourselves why do we come to church? Why would we come to church, and I have said this over and over again and I will continue to say it is because we are a family of believers, we are a faith family. You come here because you have people that you can worship with you, you come here because you have people that will pray with you, you come here because you have people you can turn to and talk with. If this building was empty on Sundays, I doubt you would come to worship, would you?

So, we come here because we want to be around people. The second thing is, we come here because there is generosity in this room, maybe not just financial, but there are people that have given up their time to teach kids on Sunday morning, there are people that have given up their time during the week to study [and prepare] to teach an adult Bible study class. There are people right now sitting in the nursery so that you can be here to worship. We have people in this church that will run to some ones house in a moment's notice because they are ill and need some groceries, or they know that they can search out prayer requests from people. Their generosity might be financial. There is

people in here that would do that when the occasion calls for it. We do this because we are a family, a faith family, and we care for one another. So, we are generous with one another.

We also come here to be safe, see our church should be as safe place that that we lay down our troubles we lay down our fears, we lay down our sins at the feet of Jesus and now sometimes people use that vulnerability against people and that is a shame and in this church we would seek church discipline in those problem areas if that was the case and if it occurred over and over again. But this is a place where people come through the doors to confess their sins, confessing they are sinner in need of Jesus for forgiveness. But it is also safe for another reason the same reason that the blind man because there are wolves outside these doors, there are people that will rob you of the true gospel, they will try to tell you that suffering is your fault if you just had more faith, there are people that tell you it is not God's plan for you to be in pain or to deal with issues if you only had enough faith. People will come to our church because we will not avoid the gospel and the suffering of man, we will not preach a gospel that omits the suffering of Christ, we will not preach a gospel that will make you smile but it will send you to hell. This is a place for sinners to hear Scripture and the truth of Scripture.

So let us put that in the context of what we are talking about, when we talk about disabilities and special needs they enter the door, what do you think they are looking for, a loving crowd, a generous heart, and a safe place to be. No different, now because people have asked what is the difference between special needs and disability I am going to define it just briefly here on my own then I will tell you what the government says I define them interchangeably so if I use one I mean both because I special needs individual has a disability and a disabled person has some type of need that is special but here is how the Department of Justice and civil rights division states "a physical or mental impairment that subsequently limits one or more of major life abilities a person

who has a history or a record of such impairment or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.”

That sure sounds like a blind man, it sure does and so when we see the blind man, we should see those things that he is seeking that the crowd, the generosity, the safe place that is what we all seek.

But then you see Jesus in these first two verses what does he see? He saw the blind man, interesting he saw him why is that important? Because we should not pretend that we are similar to one another. We should know that, listen there are some people in this room that are that are young, and they look young, there are some people in this room that are not young, and they do not look young, there are some people in this room that are men, there is some people are women, little boy's girls, some people of different races, ethnic backgrounds. See there is some people that are single and married there are some people that visible disabilities and some people with invisible disabilities. The point is we are not the same and that is a good thing, God created us that way, it is good to be different, it shows the diversity of God in his people, but it also shows that there is difficulties within everybody, it is widespread no one is immune from difficulties. Now see someone that walks through the door, they want to know something, they want to know that you recognize who they are, who they are, is so important to know because if you know who they are, you know how to help. Listen, it is a not insensitive to recognize who someone is, it would be insensitive of me, if somebody came through the door in a wheelchair and I said, “ You know what? Our children's classes are right up those stairs.” It would be insensitive of me if somebody came in blind and I said, “You know that person in the red shirt over there, they can help you . . . Go right over there.” That would be insensitive of me but acknowledging someone for who they are is not offensive. Saying something that is clearly offensive because of your ignorance is a problem.

Jesus walked up to this blind man, and he saw he was blind, now do not look at Zeke and say he is like everybody else, all the other children because he is not, he is not.

Now we often are asked what the hardest part of caring for Zeke— what is the biggest issue you have? We often say, “feeding him by hand, feeding him five times a day, and that it gets tough to do that repetitively. We have had people respond, “Well that is not so bad if that is the worst thing you have to deal with.” See? That is an offensive thing. First, I am asked what the worst thing was, you just took it for granted, and now you determine that it may not be the worst thing I am going through! Perhaps the worst thing I am going through right now might be what is on my heart at the moment, or perhaps there is some worse things that I just do not want *you* to get involved with. There are some things about Zeke that I am just not going to pull you into, because they are not always pleasant.

But sensitivity is important I do not raise my boys the same, each one of them are different Sam is different, then Nehemiah, their personalities are opposite, every child in this room should be treated differently, because they are different, they are unique, and they should be treated as such, we have to recognize that, we have to recognize that each of us have different needs because we are different people.

The disciples then ask a very logical question, “who sinned him or his parents?” Not an uncommon question, is it? Does the Bible not teach that?

Leviticus 26:39 says, “...as those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies lands before their iniquities and also because of the iniquities of their fathers they shall rot away” Is not that what it teaches there the parents saying is falling on them.

James 5:15-16 “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will rise him up and if he has committed sin, he will be forgiven therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working”

1 Corinthians 11:27- 30 “whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord is an unworthy in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and the blood of the Lord let a person examine himself and then eat and drink of the cup for

anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself that is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died”

That is what it says all of which have suggested that suffering is a consequence of sin now we do this too, let us not lie to ourselves, we have issues in life and

- We say, “Why God why?”
- “What did I do wrong?”
- “God where did I disobey?”
- “What other choice did I have?”
- “Why are you punishing me?”
- “When things go wrong why is life hard now that I am following you?”

These are the questions that I get asked and these questions can be certainly for everybody but imagine yourself a parent or a disabled individual they asked those same questions based on the text above.

I want you to notice something about the disciples they were moved to figure out the cause quicker than they were moved to show compassion. People today are always looking for the cause, afterward maybe they will show compassion. This is the disturbing movement that is taking place and churches have fallen into this problem as well. They see somebody walk in the door and they see the obstacles, they see the troubles instead of delivering compassion first.

So how do we reconcile this? We reconcile with Christ answer, Christ could have acknowledged that sin plays a role in man suffering including this blind man, he could have acknowledged that. I want to ask a question do we really want to look at sin as something that springs forth disabilities, illnesses, or sicknesses or even death, the truth is we already know that based on Genesis 3 and original sin. We also know that the wage of sin is death, in Romans 6:23. Christ response says neither of them sinned but that the works of God might be displayed in him. That is a troubling statement and I have read commentaries that I like that that are wrong about this, because they want to say here is

what happened, Christ stumbled upon this blind man and then he just took that opportunity to show grace and mercy.

But that is not what happened Jesus identified this man, he took the question of the disciples and said neither are right, the two options you gave me neither are right, but this man suffering is for God's glory. Now ladies and gentlemen that is what we call the sovereignty of God, if God truly forms men and women in the womb, if we believe that then he knows the second something is wrong, and he could stop it, but he allows it to happen. Why? For his glory it is for his glory, God does not allow suffering for no reason. Whatever issue you are going on in life it is not just because he does it for a reason, he did not create Zeke because he did not know what he was doing? Nor did He think that it was just a good idea, It all has a purpose behind it.

I would be absolutely a terrible pastor if I went up to somebody and said you know what my Bible does not teach suffering just have some more faith my friend and you will be healed. No, my Bible teaches suffering entered the world through the original sin and God is going to use that now to display his glory and his mercy. I want you to hear this it is not illness, sickness, disability, or special needs that should drive us away from God, it should drive us to hate sin. Because that is where it all came from, it should drive us to hate sin and love God, but I am not going to tell anybody with a disability:

Whether they are in a wheelchair and cannot walk, or

They are blind they cannot see, or

Deaf cannot hear, or

Down syndrome or autistic, or

ADHD or seizure disorder, or

Somebody with spinal bifida or muscular dystrophy.

I am not going to tell them that they sinned in the womb or that their parents sinned and that is what the cause of all their suffering.

I am going to tell him that God has allowed it to happen in your life and it is a purpose and the reason is for God's glory. Jesus gives that to us just in the same way.

I am not going blame somebody that got hit by a drunk driver and is now paralyzed. Somebody with cancer—I am not going to walk up to them and say, “Do you know what sin you committed?” That is not helpful, that would be ridiculous. All of it is for the glory of God.

Now, we have advertised the American gospel series and I hope you come. The very last session, the sixth session talks about suffering, and it is incredible. I hope you do not miss it.

Let us look at the final four verses: “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day night is coming when no one can work as long as I am in the world I am the light of the world having said these things he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him go wash in the pool Siloam which means sent so he went and washed and came back seeing.”

Church, we have a small amount of time on earth to work the works of him who sent Jesus and notice Jesus says “we must work” not just Jesus must work, we must work, while we have time on earth, we must set our minds on Jesus who set this example for us. There will be a time when the work is done but it is not today.

Verse 5 says, “As long as I am the world, I am the light of the world.” That is an interesting statement to make in front of a blind man who likely does not have the full concept of light. He says that right there in front of him, and I want you to acknowledge this church, it says, ‘as long as I am the world.’ He is still in the world today, he has asked us to be the light in a dark world, he has asked us to bring the light to the nations. It is our responsibility to bring the lights out, not only to the church, but to others, we are a beacon of light here in Wiggins. We are to be beacons of light everywhere we go. We are to be the light of Christ.

Let us dive into the issue everybody likes to talk about. why did Christ use spit? Why spit and creating mud? Right, that is kind of gross but let us at least start with acknowledging that it is a little gross. I think there are two main reasons why Jesus used it in this manner.

Number one, I think the answers are throughout the chapter. I am not going to read the whole chapter for you, but I think it answers itself, because it was on the Sabbath. One of the Sabbath laws was that you could not knead bread. Another one was that if you spit then you have to take dirt and the fluid you have to knead it together and make the mud. They (being the Pharisees) argue about this through the whole last of the chapter. I want you to realize that verses 1-7 [is where] the miracle takes place. The rest of the chapter is a discussion about it, arguing about it—is this really the blind man, he did it on the Sabbath. Jesus Christ he is once again declaring, “I am the Lord of the Sabbath.” He shows it through his actions and not with his words.

The second part about why he used [the example of] spit I think, is that it is a symbolic understanding that we need Christ. But we need his body just as much as we need his spirit. As a sinner we are hopeless without the blood of Christ, the actual blood of Christ is important to us. With Christ using his body, in this case, spit, he is saying, “I once again am controlling healing.” He could have just said the words and the blind man would have been healed. Yet he shows another example of it [spit]. He does it again in Mark 7 and in Mark 8; He uses spit to heal a deaf man and another blind man. The fact is we need the body of Christ, and we need to understand that this is why Christ used the mud and spit.

But then you have this “pool of Siloam” which translates “pool of sent.” Here, the word “sent” implies that this pool has a source of water that was from somewhere else. Maybe a stream or an irrigation of some kind, but it implies that its source is from somewhere else. Yet it was the source of the healing was it not? He put the mud on went to the pool washed it off and then the blind man could see. It was the source of the

healing. What does that remind you of? What does he say in verse 4? “We must work the works of those who sent me.” Because Jesus is from a different source. He has come and he settles in our hearts, and his source is from somewhere else. His source, his settling in our hearts, that is what heals us, that is what guides us and binds us to him.

People want to ask about the cause of suffering. They want a manmade answer to understand their grief, but this chapter does answer that question, John 9 verses 35 through 40.

“Jesus heard that they had cast him out. now that is the blind man they had finally cast him out because they did not like what he what had happened to him and having found him he said do you believe in the Son of Man he answered and who is he Sir that I may believe in him Jesus said to him you have seen him and it is he who is speaking to you and he said Lord I believe and he worshipped him Jesus said for judgment I came into this world that those who do not see, may see, and those that see may become blind some of the Pharisees near him heard these things and said to him are we also blind Jesus said to him if you were blind you would have no guilt but now that you say we see your guilt remains.”

Continuing in John 9 Versus 37 and 38 says that Jesus said to him, you have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you and the blind man believed and he worshipped him. That is the point of suffering, the point of suffering is to come closer to God and if you do not know God it is to bring you to him. That is the point whatever ailment you are going through again it drives you too God not away, but then Jesus gets theological with us in verse 39 he says

“for judgment I come into the world that those who do not see will see and those who see may become blind.”

Those that are blind will see. Those that see are blind. True blindness are those that cannot see Jesus as the Son of God; that is true blindness. Let us be clear: those that are blind, deaf, mute, cannot walk, Down syndrome, autism, ADHD, spina bifida, seizure

disorders, muscular dystrophy, cancer, other sicknesses and ailments or disabilities—*all* [emphasis added] will be gone in heaven. That is the blessed thing about it; it is only temporary. All [sickness] will be gone if you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You are adopted into the family of God and someday all those people, all of them with all of their disabilities, all of their ailments, they will stand before God and they will cry out, “Abba Father!” But those that cannot see God’s glory right in front of them, they are to be blind, and they will remain blind for eternity. For the rest of us, that believe in Jesus we will see.

The greatest act of hospitality occurs when we enter heaven. It will be filled with believers, and it will be crowded. We will know the generosity of God at that moment, unlike anything else. And church, it will be the ultimate safe place, [because] it is safe from sin itself. We are all waiting for that hospitality moment in heaven but while we are here, we are to do the works of that [God] who sent Jesus.

We are to be a light upon the world, we are to be hospitable to all. That includes men, women, race, ethnic groups, disability, and special needs. It does not matter; it is through this way that we are to be Christlike. I will leave you with this: do not always be focused on the cause of your suffering. That will drive you crazy. I will give you the answer; it is in Genesis 3. Focus on the purpose of your suffering: it is to glorify God. Let us pray. Dear Heavenly Father, there is more people in this room that are suffering from something, that no one knows. Lord, I ask that you guide them and help them see the purpose of their suffering. Lord, I know there are people that are suffering from physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial alignments, and more...please I ask that they focus on the purpose of their suffering. We know that you are sovereign, that will teach us, allow us to be humbled and to be strong and faithful in all that we do. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

Sermon 3: Luke 14:7-24: All Are Welcome

We will be in the gospel of Luke Chapter 14.

Have you ever been invited to a party and kind of felt like you are the third wheel? Like, they kind of just invited you because they needed to fill up a little bit more. Or, you are a guest, as a friend of a friend, and it just was awkward? Or maybe you are invited because you are the cool kid? So, I get that some of you guys probably are, but about five to six years ago, Rebecca and I were at a church and wanted to join a Home Group. We asked the church if we could join one and we got placed into one. We showed up on time at 7:00 o'clock and, we did not realize the 7:00 o'clock really met 7:30 to everybody else. We were early, brought our bibles ready to study. Whatever the host was going to provide for us that day we were eager to sit, listen, talk, and meet new people. Yet, when people started to arrive, the time just started going by; it was 7:30, 8, 8:30, and eventually, the men gathered into the living room. They started watching some baseball because it was the playoffs at that time. They cracked open up a few beers while the ladies stayed in the dining area and just chatted for the entire evening.

Rebecca and I felt out of place. I felt awkward. We did not realize that what had actually happened was a group of friends, under the umbrella of “the church,” created what they just called a “Home Group.” Mistakenly, somebody at the church inserted us into this group. It was *not* a good fit—it was just weird—it was strange—and needless to say, we just did not go back to that group again. Now, I want you to imagine for a moment, if this group had actually done what it was designed to do—to have a Bible study, to meet new people, to have some fellowship, to gain some friends and friendships— it would have been much more effective if that had taken place. But it did not and it was so awkward.

This passage has two main parables. It has a parable that talks about being a guest and then it has a parable about a host. We are going to look at these two parables as we go through [the scriptures] here and see what we can draw from them.

First, verses 7-11 now he told the parable to those who were invited when he noticed how they chose a place of honor, saying to them: “When you are invited by someone into a wedding feast do not sit in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him and he who invited you will come and say to you, give your place to this person and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place, but when you are invited go and sit in the lowest place so that when your host comes he may say to you friend move up higher then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with. You for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

That is a fascinating little parable, right? Because we are effectively being told that we should not seek high positions among men, a guest should not seek to be in the honor chair, and the only way that you get there is if you are welcomed by the host to that chair. That is basically the parable in a quick nutshell. I am not going to spend too much time on this parable itself, but I think it is incredibly important to understand that this sets up the next parable and how important it would be for SBC to make sure that we do not put ourselves above anybody else. That we, as we are in our chairs today, we do not see ourselves as proud, to let anybody through those doors, we do not see ourselves that we should withhold any kind of worship from anybody else that seeks it. Additionally, we should not be shy about our faith, we should not hide our passion for Christ, we should

not be disingenuous when it comes to the gospel, we should humble ourselves because we will be exalted, but not exalted here on earth but in heaven.

The next portion is where we start seeing some wonderful aspects come out. Christ-centered hospitality is what this is about. I think there are some aspects that we are going to see what Christ-centered hospitality is actually about so let us begin the parable of the great banquet.

“He said also to the men who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet do not invite your friends, or your brothers, or your relatives, or rich neighbors, at least they also invite you in return, and you will be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

That is also an amazing statement. He is saying, “Let us not get that bias *too* quickly, right? In verse 12, Jesus is saying that we do not invite those that will repay you, instead invite those that cannot repay you because the blessings will be great at the resurrection of the just. What does that mean as a church? As individuals? Well, how can we invite people that do not repay us?

The first aspect of Christ-centered hospitality when we look at it, is that people usually do that part right—they invite people, or they do something for something in return, so the first thing is that should not expect anything in return.

Now, we have to understand this in two different fashions—as a pastor or a leader—you cannot be drawn to the person that has a lot of money—you cannot be drawn and become a buddy with that person who gives a lot to the church. That is a warning sign for people that want to just kind of gravitate to those that can make life easier for

you. But leading in a church cannot be motivated by money. If you make decisions—hard decisions when it comes to finances, and financial pressure, you cannot have that pressure applied by somebody that might have an alternative motive. Things can go sideways very quickly in that case. It is often—and most pastors—including myself—they do not look at the giving statements. We do not care. Not that we do not want you to give—we do want you to give—give what your heart calls you to give—but it is not going to determine how I minister to you. It is not determining whoever has the deepest pockets gets most of my attention—that is not how pastoring works. To be a minister to God, to be an ambassador for Christ—if that was the case, I would fail you. I have been in churches—big churches where the pastor gravitates to the millionaires because they [the millionaires] can make life easy for them because they can help in a lot of different ways. But it is a warning to leaders.

But it is also a warning to the church itself. We talked about generosity within the church already here and how grateful I am that people utilize their time, their efforts, their money for us, but as a host, we cannot expect things in return.

There are families and individuals out there who cannot give anything back. See, special needs families and the disabled are squarely in this category—they cannot give anything back.

I know a mother right now who is going through a divorce. She has a child that is autistic. The care of the autistic child put too much pressure on the family. The husband and wife just could not overcome the pressure. She is spent emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually but it is somehow by the grace of God that she continues to seek a relationship with him. She comes [to church] and she has no money because of the

divorce. She has all this time that she spends with her child. For forty-five minutes she gets to worship Jesus without her child—she craves the time with the Lord. Now if the church would have said to her hey do me a favor, we need you to volunteer for X number of Sundays if you want us to continue watch your child—that would break her. Because it is that rest that she craves—the rest in Christ. So many people, so many of us need that. Matthew 11:28 says, “Come to me all who are labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle, lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

People need that. We all seek that some of us at times need it more than others. Some of us at times need it more frequently or for longer durations. But we all need it from this world. In this world, in this community, in this church there are people that cannot give get back. As a church, we must be willing and able to accept that as part of our ministry to him without envy, without any frustration that builds up in our heart.

So, then we get further, and we see zero expectations need to come from this and then in verse 13 and 14, it says, “But when you give a feast invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

The second aspect of Christ-centered hospitality is this...

—We are to invite those that are different from us,

—We invite those that are not like us.

It talks about two people—it is two things. It talks about who we should invite in the future blessings *and* it is critical for us to understand this—it is hard for people to say I want to be invited with somebody that is different from me—but as a host in this

particular parable, you can see he is probably a wealthy host. He is having a banquet, which, in and of itself, costs a lot. But when [the Scripture] says not to invite your friends, your family, brothers, or your rich neighbors—usually rich neighbors if you have them—you are well off yourself. So, he is obviously a wealthy individual. Jesus has said you do not invite those people—you invite the *opposite*.

I want to be very clear. Is not that a little convicting? That is convicting to me because I do not always invite the opposite. Because there is some people that are just like me that I would rather be around. But it is convicting to invite not your friends, not the people that act like you, that think like you that share your same politics or have a similar background as you. You invite the *opposite*—those that act differently than you, those that think differently, those that look differently, those that have different political views, different backgrounds, those that have disabilities or special needs that you are aware of—that is what Christ is asking of us.

A few weeks ago, I am not exactly sure when I talked about old Wiggins and new Wiggins. I have a hilarious neighbor who grew up here in Wiggins and moved away for about a year for work and now lives in Kiowa Park. He has the funniest stories based on that his knowledge of both areas. He is very well aware of old Wiggins because he grew up in it. He is also aware of new Wiggins. He can tell me stories of people that come to him and say there is too much traffic, too much noise, there is too much stuff people bringing from the city we do not like it—. Then he goes on to talk about all these friends here at Kiowas Park that say, “Where’s the nearest Italian restaurant—Greeley.” They need one here in Wiggins—why does the Wiggins store close so early, do not they know

people shop at all hours of the night—. So, you have these divergent things that people think about. I want you to imagine for a moment inviting those people over for dinner.

No matter which side you are on, how might that go, not pushing an agenda, not trying to change them, but just to share some time with them. That would be weird for a lot of people. The point of this part of the passage is that you invite people who are different from you. As a church, we invite people who are different from us, we invite them to our church, we invite them to our homes, and we invite them to meals with us because with diversity comes great opportunity.

Why do we do this? Why do we invite people who are different? Because most of the time people that are different would not repay us in the way that we think we should be repaid. The blessings come later. Now I do not want you to think about this wrongly—there is nothing wrong with having people over that are similar to you, that you can care about, love—and having friends and family—rich neighbors, if that is you, that that can come and talk to you, but the greatest blessing is not on earth. The smallest blessing that heaven can offer us, exceeds anything the earth can give us. That is what we should be looking for. I would love to experience blessings in heaven far more than I would want any blessings here on earth.

But that is where everything starts turning, he gets really interesting after this because we have this guy in verse 15 now, I am going to read it quickly, “When one of those who recline at the table with him heard these things, he said, “blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God,” the dude misses it right? This is a big swing and a miss; he does not understand what Jesus is trying to talk about. So, he just says well everybody is blessed—it is at the Kingdom of God and so Jesus has to define his parable

a little bit more. He goes on a little bit into greater detail. He said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many, and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who he had invited, “Come, for everything is ready.” But they all began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a field and I must go out and see it, please have me excused. Another said, “I have bought five yoke of ox—I need to go and examine them, please have me excused.” And another said, “I have married a wife and therefore I cannot go.” So, the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry, and he said to his servants, “Go quickly to the streets in the lanes of the city and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, lame”—and the servant said, “Sir, what you have commanded has been done and still there is room.” The master said to his servant, “Go out to the highways, and hedges, and compel people to come in that my house may be filled, for I tell you none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”

That is incredible, I do not think we can break it completely. You have five parties here. You had the man that throws the banquet, you have his servant, you have those that decline the invitation, then you have two sets of people that receive a new invitation—those in the streets and those in the highways.

Let us look at verses sixteen through twenty: A man throws a banquet; he invites his friends. That is his first mistake. Knowing the previous parable, right? Knowing what he was saying, he invites his friend, so that is mistake number one. He prepares a feast. Now I want you to think about it. Preparing a feast is a big deal. We have Thanksgiving, they do not have refrigerators or ovens. For their feast, they have to go out and slaughter the meats, they have to cut it, they have to get the grain for the bread, and the vegetables,

and they have to do all these things, and it takes a lot of work to prepare a feast. Then he sends out his servants to gather his guests and tell them that it is ready. Now, I will admit to you right now, I am highly influenced by one of my professors. In this passage, he is a mentor of mine, a man I look up to: Dr. Hershel York. We sat and we had great conversation about this passage. He said to me, notice there are two invitations: Let us say we do this today, and I want you to think about that, with how we do it today—we invite people to Thanksgiving—that is invitation one.

“Hey, are you going to come to Thanksgiving? I need to know how much I need to cook; I do not know how many pies we need to make. We need to know how many turkeys we need to make. We need to know how many place settings, and we need to have an invitation given up front.” But then there is a second invitation. People arrive, they sit, and they drink some coffee, and some lemonade, and somebody comes out to the living room, and says “The meal is ready, let us go sit down at the table.” That is the second invitation. The implication is that if you accept the first invitation, the second one is automatic. I mean you would not drive to somebody’s house on Thanksgiving sit there enjoy some coffee and then when somebody comes out to you and says “Hey the meal’s ready” —and you say “You know what? I am buying a house; I have to go sign some papers.” You would not do that. Look at these excuses, and they are pretty bad excuses, I bought a field, I bought five yoke oxen, and I have married a wife. I mean seriously, these are things that do not happen immediately or quickly offhand. These are things that take time. You buy a field. Do you know how long it takes to buy a house right now? To buy a field back then you must have somebody that negotiates the price, sets the boundaries, have a legal document, have a legal representative that measures out the

payment—it is not a quick process so they would have known prior to the first invitation if this was going to be an issue.

The second, one says I have bought five yokes of oxen now if a farmer wants to correct me on this, they can but a ‘yoke’ is, from my understanding, is that wooden harness that binds two oxen together. I am thinking he buys five yokes of oxen—he is buying ten oxen. if I am wrong on that, I am sorry, but that is what I see implied here. If you are buying that many oxen, you have money, yeah you have money, and not only you do you have money, but you have servants, and not only do you have servants, but you have servants that will examine those oxen. For you, have no need to go examine them, yet that is what he says. The third guy does not even give an excuse he says I am married I cannot go; I got things to do—you know what I am saying? Or maybe she is just mean and would not let him go, I do not know, but again that is not something that is quick. A marriage takes time, a wedding takes time to build up to, it takes a lot of time, so this person would have been invited—he is a distinguished person throwing a banquet. He would have been invited, and he would have known this. So, it starts to look like a conspiracy against him—all these men give unbelievable excuses.

We see here in verse 20 and 21 that the servant came and reported all the things to the master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to the servant, “Go quickly to the streets in the lanes of the city and bring in the poor, and the crippled, and the blind, and the lame—the servant said, “Sir, what you have commanded has been done and still there’s room.”

The third part about Christ-centered hospitality is that we are to seek all for the Great Commission.

The servant reported back. What does the master do? He is angry. I told you that I sat with my professor and talked to him about this passage. He wanted me to notice that anger and I want *you* to notice it right now. Before we move on, he is angry. He is angry, he tells his servant to go out to the cities, and all the streets, and bring in who you can, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, and the servant reported that he had done it. I anticipated that I have already done this. The man will not have a feast go to waste. He will have guests; and he will have the guests to have a meal. He brought in those people—why those people? Because this group of people—the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, they would not turn down a feast, and this group of people you will not find excuses, *they will find a way to get there*. Church, there are people out in Wiggins right now, that if they were invited, they would find a way to get here. All they need is an invitation. They would find a way to get to church—they will figure it out. There are people that make excuses not to go to church. But there are people that will work hard to get to church and they are needing an invitation, because there is still room—*there is still room*.

Then in verse 23 and 24, he instructs his servant to go out further and further to find people and compel them. Why compel? Because you are going to a highway with a lot of people passing by and they are not going to even know who that guy is throwing a banquet. So, you have to compel them to come. He is saying to those men that made the excuses, “You will not taste my banquet.”

Do you understand the parable?

I am going to give it a quick go right here for you. The man that he is throwing the banquet with that —that is our heavenly Father—he sends out his servant Christ, the first

invitation was given through the law to describes in the Pharisees, but because they did not accept Jesus Christ as the second invitation—as the Kingdom of God—is now at hand as Christ has said they rejected him. God says to go out to Israel and just gather me as many people as you can. Then he says, “no go further, go to the gentiles, go to those that you need to compel to come to the Kingdom of God.”

Because the feast is awaiting you, for those that do not accept my invitation they will not taste what I have for them in the Kingdom of God. My professor said, “Remember how angry he got, but he turns anger into grace. That is our heavenly Father, he turns anger into grace—the person that we sin against every day, the wrath that rightly should be on my shoulders, was given to Jesus to endure the anger and the wrath and the pain and he turned it what should have been eternal damnation into grace.” Because they rejected him, he became angry but instead of delivering upon the world the wrath of God he decided to give his son and the grace if only you accept that invitation. Jesus does something in verse twenty-four that not everybody sees. Maybe you have, he says, “Before I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”

Throughout the entire parable he uses a singular plural noun for everything, but right here that “for I tell you” that is like *you guys*, because he is no longer talking in a parable. He is sitting at a table with Scribes, and Pharisees, and he stops the parable, and he looks at him and he says, “For you guys, will not taste my banquet.”

That is shocking, if we recognize that we are in the highways and the hedges we could see things differently. God is making and giving us this amazing opportunity of grace, the hospitality that we offer others we would be foolish to not give because of the hospitality Christ has given us.

I would charge that Christ demands that we call on the disabled, and special needs specifically—with no exceptions—special needs families have a draw to church. You will be shocked at how much they want to go to church. But they struggle with the decision because of the personal relationship with God they have but at the same time it is a struggle to get there. All they need is encouragement and assurance that whatever issues they are dealing with *will be welcomed*.

—So, we have to learn that we cannot be guests in this world and think that we deserve an honor table or a seat at the honor table. Only when Christ offers us that.

—We cannot enter into the Kingdom of heaven thinking we have done things to earn our way there. We must be humbled and allow God to give us that glory and honor.

—We must be accepted are charged to invite those that we have nothing in common with.

—We have to accept the charge to look at those who cannot repay us with anything.

—We have to accept the Great Commission to all people in all groups that struggle. Those who struggle in a lot of different ways, a bad guest looking for approval of man is not who we are.

Instead, we are to humble ourselves before God and we cannot be at church, we cannot be a heavenly hub intended to welcome all people and accepting God's invitation on our own and yet we do not turn away anybody.

The three aspects of Christ-centered hospitality are:

—No expectations,

—Invitation to all those that are different,

—Actively seeking all in the Great Commission.

Because *that* is what it takes to model Christ-centered hospitality in our church, in our homes, and in our lives. Remember the illustration I talked about at the beginning where Rebecca and I went to the Home Group? Imagine what they [that group] could have been. What they could have accomplished if they had only done what they were designed to do.

Church, imagine what we could do and what we could accomplish if we just only do what we are *designed* to do.

Let us pray, Dear Heavenly Father, we ask that you build upon our hearts today. Help us to remember that we are those that have been invited in, help us remember that our lives need to reflect what you have done for us. Guide our hearts today as we learn to treat others with respect, and with invitations to join us in this journey of life. Thank you for all the blessings you have offered us today. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.

Sermon 4: Deuteronomy 6:5:Loving God

Good morning once again we are going to be in the Old Testament. Today we are going to be starting with Deuteronomy Chapter 6:5—just one verse today—a pretty simple verse. For the next three weeks, we will be concluding our series on “In His Image,” with our attention toward welcoming people, specifically those that are different from us—those with special needs, those with disabilities, and those in general.

But we turn our attention today to something different. What is our responsibility in our Christian life? What does it mean to be a Christian? Because if we live in such a way of not having responsibilities as a Christian, we not only are wrong in that, but we put ourselves in a place of complacency. So, if we do not fully understand our responsibilities as a Christian, we become complacent in our relationship with God and thus, we go down the wrong path.

So, if I were to read to you Deuteronomy Chapter 6:5, it says “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all of your might.”

Let us pray before we dig in. Father, we thank you today for this message. We thank you for the blessing it is to be in your house. And Lord, just guide us and help us in response to your Word to love you more. In Jesus’s name I pray. Amen.

How do we respond to that single verse? “...you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and with all of your might?”

Are you truly following Scripture? If this is what Scripture says, it is stated here—are you doing that? Now, I want us to look at a few aspects of this. It says you shall love, *you, you Christian*, shall love the Lord your God. If we look back a verse, we know that he is speaking directly to Israel. Which leads us to understand something; he is not talking to nonbelievers; he is talking to his *chosen* people; he is talking those that

believe in him. You cannot love somebody unless you know them. You cannot. It does not work that way. We have to ask ourselves what this means—why it is that you shall love the Lord your God.

Well, first I think we need to look at the other aspect of it. What are nonbelievers? What does the Bible say about nonbelievers?

Romans 1:18-32 says, "...for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness from men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth or it can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them for his invisible attributes namely his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly preserved ever since the creation of the world and the things that have been made, so they are without excuse, for although they knew God they do not honor him as God or give thanks to him but they become futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened claiming to be wise they became fools in exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal men and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore, God gave them up to the lust of their hearts to impurity to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions for their women exchanged natural relationship for those that are contrary to nature and men likewise gave up natural relations with women we are consumed with passion for one another men committing shameful acts with men and receiving in them the due penalty in their errors, and since they do not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, malice, they

are full of envy, murder, strife deceit, maliciousness, they are gossips slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless, though they know God's righteousness decree that those who practice such things deserve to die they not only do them, but they give approval to those who practice them."

Well, that is our society in a nutshell. Really, we have to understand Romans 1 to some degree. God gave them up—it said multiple times Church. Those are words that should *shake us to our core*—God gave them up. Boy, I do not ever want to hear those words from anybody—and certainly not God. The judgment of God comes with those four words. *God gave them up*—gave them up to what? In the lust of their hearts, to impurity, to this dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, he gave them up to dishonorable passions, he gave him up to a debased mind, although they know God exists, they chose not to believe in him. They suppressed the truth, which has been made clear to them.

If you ever get yourself in a conversation with an atheist—if you find yourself in a *wonderful* conversation with them, that is your starting point. You could say to them if you wanted to, "Although I know you say you do not think God exists, I believe you know God exists but you are choosing not to believe in God—your mind has been suppressed. The truth has been given to you, but you have been given up [by God] for a debased mind."

It is probably not the best starting point really. [I know] that is what you are thinking in your head. I would not say that out loud but that is where you are starting from—that they know the truth, but they have chosen to go away from it. So, when you

read Deuteronomy 6:5 and it says, You shall love “those who are believers in Christ.” Those are the believers in the one true God. Because anybody else that does not believe in Jesus is incapable of loving him, incapable, it *cannot happen*. It is God’s chosen people, here specifically, it is referring to Israel, but we know from our studies it extends to *us* because of Christ. But it is also more than that, it is for those people that have been redeemed by God, for Israel was redeemed, their redemption came from the slavery out of Egypt. For you and me, we have been redeemed from the slavery of sin. This message has to be for God’s people. That is what he is saying—because you love God, it is for those that want to be brought into the promise and see nonbelievers, they do not have a love for God.

What is our message when we talk about non-believers? It is not ‘love God.’ That is not our message to them. The message is to repent and believe in the gospel, it is to be reconciled with Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and then, and only then, can the love of God be implanted in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. And then they can love the Lord their God with their hearts, souls, and minds. Right off the bat we know that we are opposed to God. We know that in our nature we reposed in our hearts, in our souls, in our minds, we hate God. But it is only reconciled with His son that has given us an opportunity to love him. Some of the most disheartening moments in our life are when we know people that love the church but hate God. Those who come to church because they enjoy the fellowship. They enjoy the people, but the very mention of Jesus Christ does not make sense to their stomach, because of who he is.

That is sad. That is a terrible place. So, we must understand when it says you shall love, that this is not a commandment to the unrighteousness. This is a commandment to

believers that have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, this is deep in their heart, that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, through the Holy Spirit, who lived a sinless life, which died on the cross, rose again three days later, and defeated sin and death. That is who this message is for. *You shall love the Lord your God.*

Maybe today, that is many of you but maybe it is not. Your love for fellowship of the church is there but your love for God is not. If that is you today, I want to encourage you to seek out the answers God has already made clear to you. *Repent and believe* because the love of God is tremendous if we understand it.

For those that do believe today, this message is for you. This is for the Christian. Embrace your love for Jesus Christ and know that he is your Redeemer. He is the one that keeps his promise, he is the one that gave you salvation. Because we know that we cannot do it on our own so if you are a part of that category, listen. You love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your might—this message is for *you*.

Let us look at who we are to love the Lord your God. Now, if you have a Bible, open, and see that the word “Lord” in your Bible there is likely capitalized. The reason is because it is a certain word that the translators wanted to make sure you understood what word it is. So, if you do not know what word it is let us learn that really quick. That is the name of God, in the Old Testament. If “Lord” is capitalized, it is the name of God. It is the name that God gave Moses at the burning bush, right? Moses asked, “What is your name?” What did God say? God said, “My divine name is Yahweh, which translates to I am.” I want you to remember that in the Hebrew culture they do not say this word. They do not put in the vowels because it is of high reverence to them. They want to sanctify

this word and everything they get. This word, later, its root goes to Jehovah; which is another story for another time. This is where we get the word Jehovah from, but the personal name of God is important today.

Why? Because in today's culture everyone wants to say you can love the Lord your God, whoever that may be, whatever it is, maybe it is a person, maybe it is another God, maybe it is money, whatever it is, you love whatever God you want. But that is not what the Bible says. It says you shall love Yahweh your God, *Yahweh your God*—Yahweh is not another God. He is the God of the Bible, he is the Creator of the heaven and earth, he is the one that put wrath on the earth through the flood but saved Noah and his family, he is the one that walked with Abraham on his journey, he is the one that saved Israel from Egypt, he is the one that said kings and prophets, he is the one that revealed himself and his son Jesus Christ, and he is the one that poured his wrath down on his son on the cross so that you and I can see the other side of heaven. That is Yahweh, and if you worship any other God with any other affinity with any other name, you are not worshipping the God of the Bible. If you love Jesus, you will love the Father. Such an aspect of our faith is important. Our society today wants to remove the name of God.

They are *okay* with you worshipping things; whatever you want. You can worship your sexual orientation, your political power, you can worship money, you can worship any other God, but you need not say the name of God. Because if you do, that corners you into a certain faith—that is called pluralism in our society. Church, we are called to love our God Yahweh and no other God shall come before him. Our faith is distinct because of this it is distinct because of the name Yahweh.

Then it says how we are to love him with all of our hearts, *all of our heart*—nothing less, but full affection to God. As we grow in age our faith should grow, our understanding of him should grow. He walks with us he calls us to love him with all of our heart—*nothing less*. It is about an inward desire for him, through our hearts. You know Jewish tradition is really kind of funny when it comes to the heart, they think that people think with your heart—that is how they would say it—so you say things through your heart. That is found in Luke 6:45 “...the good person out of the good treasures of his heart produces good and the evil person out of the evil treasures produces evil for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth will speak.” You think in your heart your emotions are in your heart? Your desires are in your heart? They would not understand today’s phrase “my brain is telling me this, but my heart’s telling me this”—they would say, “Well that is the same thing.” They would not understand that. Are you loving God with your speech. Are you loving God in how you speak with language? Are you using foul language? Are you using your words to uplift or to be negative? How is your tone of voice? How are you using it? How about your desires? Now let us be clear, there are going to be desires that pull you away from God. There is going to be desires that pull you *toward* God. That is the path that you can take. What heart are you allowing to take you in the right direction? Are you loving God with all your passions? Your passion in life—are you using it to glorify God? Are you loving God with your emotions? Remember, I have told you this before and I will say it again, love is a funny emotion because it is both a choice and in an emotion. You love somebody but sometimes they are not lovable, so I am going to say I love you anyway, it is a choice and an emotion. So, we look at that we have to understand that because emotions are controllable to a degree, not

that you understand emotions but that you react to them appropriately. When you get mad at that guy that cuts you off on the road. Yeah, you will get mad but it is your choice to react by tailgating them and cause issues or by letting it go. Right? That is how you control emotions.

Let me give you a personal anecdote. The other day I sat down with Rebecca. We do this probably once a month or maybe a little bit longer, maybe once a quarter. We talk about our marriage because I want to know that I am doing good things in the marriage. I do not want to do bad things in the marriage. If she is holding things inside because she does not want to start a conflict, well that is not good. So, I sat down with her, and I said, “Listen, I am wrong a lot, now my emotions tell me I am right every time, but I am wrong a lot and that is what I fight with when we disagree; my fight is from my emotions, it is not from logic.” My goodness, do you know how often I am wrong, particularly when I am talking to her? She is smarter than I am. So, you have to say yourself, “I am going to make sure I am controlling my emotions, I am doing things appropriately—I am talking to you, because our marriage is to glorify God and our marriage is to bring honor to him, so if I am yelling at you in your face that is not bringing honor, it is not fixing anything.” So, we glorify because we control our emotions, we glorify God through that. Loving God is the same way—we love him by displaying His glory and honor.

Then it says we love him with all of our soul. Now, the soul here is a very complex word and it really comes down to this; it is similar to life—you love him with all of your life, your energies, your ability, the years you have you commit to deploy all the gifts that God has given you back in to what He would have you do—you do all things

for him. You all the time, you show your family that you love them by what you do with all of your soul. You just do things for them. You do that with your work. If you love work, you show it by your soul. Some people do in sports—I do not dress up—I like the Broncos just fine but I am not a maniac though, I do not paint my face or do anything like that. Some of those guys are into that so they show with their soul that they are in love with their sport. But what are the things that you are doing to show your Lord, your God Yahweh with all of your soul? Not for a moment, *but for years, for a lifetime*. I wish when I was younger, I did more in the church, I really do, I truly do. Because when I was young, I would have just jumped right on in, and I would have done a lot of things, and it would have improved my life greatly because of the knowledge I would have built. Because of that, I would have given my soul to it. You know it is changed. Things would have changed, a lot of things for me. A lot of problems I would have had, the outcome would have been different. So, young people, do not let youth be an excuse for letting years slip away. Jump into a ministry and be a part of the church. Run your life through the church, it can impact you greatly. Do not waste your talents—any talent that you have God has gifted you, so you use it to His glory because you love him.

Then it says, “with all of your might.” Now, this “might” word can also be translated to “strength.” It can also be translated to the word “much.” We are going to talk about that “much part” a little bit because certainly, strengthened, might be understood in a lot of different ways. But when you talk about “much” and I read one commentary, it said that it is translated really as “muchness,” which is not an English word. But we can use the word muchness. Because some of our might and our strength many times is based on our possessions. Remember the rich young man in Matthew 9?

He had a lot of *muchness*, but it was really his weakness because he did not use it for strength—he was unwilling to give it up.

I want you to think about what is happening in the world today. The war that broke out—there is one particular party in that war that has a lot more muchness than the other one. So, they are stronger. They are considered stronger because they have more money, they have more armies, they have more resources, they have more might and strength because they have much. How are you using your *much*? How is it that you spend your money? Where do you spend your possessions, your time—because that is where you love. Let me ask it a different way because that does not feel good to some people. Do you love your wife or your husband? If you were not to spend a single dime on them, I would disagree. If you were to say every time, we go out we are going Dutch, all right I am not going to buy you any Christmas gifts or birthday gifts, you can buy your own with your own money, make sure you are using your own money. If you do not spend your money on your kids or your spouse, you are not loving them. That is an honest answer. So, we ask ourselves what percentage of your *much* or your *might* do you think is an appropriate amount to express your love to God?

A few weeks ago, I sat down with the tax guy, and we filled in two boxes particularly, a lot of boxes, but two boxes in particular: one box was to show how much God has loved me by how much he has given me. And the second box was how much I love him. How much I gave back to the church, how much I gave to missionaries, how much I gave to other Christian organizations. That second box is a pretty important box. Rebecca and I distribute our money in that way. We have a percentage that we like to give out and its different organizations and different things, but it is in those two boxes

that represents your *muchness*—and it is in those two boxes that are directly related to your love toward God. Now, you do not like that, a lot of people would not like that, but it is true, how much of your *muchness* is a reflection of your love toward God. Your greatest passion is in your *muchness*, it is reflection of your love, not only to God, but to Christ and is it done with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your might. Love the Lord your God! Every Christian sitting in here today—you have an eternal life that has been given to you, you have been redeemed from hell, and your love of God with all of heart, with all your soul, with all of your might, how you doing with that? I have got to confess that is a convicting painful thing to think about. It was for me, too. I am not sure that I have ever loved God with *all* of my heart, with *all* of my soul and with *all* of my might, maybe not *ever* and thank goodness, RC Sproul once said after reading this passage, he said, “I haven’t done that for five minutes.” A man that made me feel a little bit better about myself, to be honest with you, because a man that I admire for his faith and his conviction is a theological positions he said that he has not loved Jesus with all of his heart, with all his soul, with all of his might for five minutes. And he is right, because neither have I.

But what does that point out to us? Why is that important? Because it points out to us that you and I still need a Savior—a Savior that has loved God, but also who loves us with all of His heart, with all of His soul, and with all of his might. He is the key for us. That means we need a savior right now. Not when I was eight years old, when I first came to Christ, but I need a Savior *today* just as much as I needed him then because I am on the edge every day. God has graciously put His mercy hold on to me but I am on the edge and he loves me, because I love him, because he loved me first.

I know that this is hard for us to really want to dig into why this sermon, because this sermon series, is about loving those that are different from us, those disabled, the special needs all of that is why it is important to jump into loving God. Because if we do not understand our responsibilities in loving God then how can we love one another? A God that has given me everything; He is given me salvation, He is given me a wife, He is given me a family, He is died for me, and if I cannot love him how can I love you, which you have disappointed me a lot. Everybody disappoints everybody. How can we love each other if we do not understand our responsibilities and loving God. It is critical for us to work toward that. As we grow, we try to get closer and one day we will be standing before heaven and we will be loving God with all of our heart, with all of our soul, with all of our might, but until then we try harder and harder, and we continue to recognize that Jesus Christ is the key.

Our response here is to love. Learn to love God because loving him will teach us to learn to love others. I am going to leave you with John 21:15-17 which says this because I think it is a critical aspect of love: "...when they finished breakfast Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him tend my sheep. He said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time 'do you love me,' and he said to him, "Lord you know everything, you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

Church, if Christ stood before you today and asked, “Do you love me?” If your answer is “yes” and you want to grow to learn to love God, with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your might, you also have to learn to tend sheep, to feed his sheep, tend his lamps, love those that are currently incapable of loving God—love those struggling in life, struggling with disabilities, or special needs. Love them, care for them, and care for your neighbors that you cannot understand why they do the things they do. Because if they cannot love God, but you are called to love them.

This week we have looked at loving God. Next week, we are going to look at Leviticus 19:18 about loving others, because our responsibilities will pour out of loving God. Church, learn to love Yahweh, learn to love your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your might.

Let us pray, dear Jesus, let us be still and hear from you today. Remind us of what we are to do, according to your will. Let us now be ashamed of what you ask of us and what we are to do in response to your grace. Give us guidance and bless our day moving forward, in Jesus name I pray, Amen.

Sermon 5: Leviticus 19:18: Hello Neighbor

We will be in the book of Leviticus today. It is a privilege to talk about this incredible passage, in fact, it is not even a passage it is a single verse. Actually, it is a half of a verse that we are going to talk about today, but it is incredibly pregnant with information that we should take with us when we are trying to be more Christlike.

First, let us remember last week as we talked about what is a Christian's responsibility when it comes to loving God. We talked about how we are to love God with all of our hearts, with all of our soul, and with all of our might. We understood the importance of God's name in that verse, we talked about:

- How we are to love God?
- Who is to love God?
- What God we are to love and all the elements that it said about all of our heart our soul and our might?

This week, we are going to talk about what it means to love our neighbor. The passage really is quite simple today, "...you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

This is an amazing statement if you think about it. "Everyone in here can kind of look at those words and they have two basic reactions."

Reaction one, is 'how am I to love another individual as I love myself? As myself, I am pretty awesome, and not everyone else is as awesome, and so how can I love them as much as I love myself? Others will take what I call a "humble approach" and they will say, "Well, you know, I am not really a lover of myself. I do not see myself in that way, I do not have a lot of pride in myself" and although that is really good and that is humble and that is what you should do.

I think it is important also to understand that there are aspects of everybody's life that are self-love. If I were to put a bomb in the middle of the sanctuary and I said, "Okay, we have thirty seconds...ready, set, go!" There would be a mad dash to the exit because we all have a mechanism inside of us that says we are to preserve ourselves. We are to try to find a way to survive with those mechanisms in us.

- When we are hungry we eat.
- When we are cold we put on a jacket.
- When we see danger, we want to avoid it, we take actions to avoid danger.
- When we have things in our life that we see as enjoyable and things that we like, we gravitate toward it.

So those are all mechanisms that everyone has. In one way or another those are self-loving mechanisms. To be clear, in that particular fashion, loving yourself is not a sinful act. It is not prideful to say, "I am hungry." and then you go eat—it is not pride—that is what God has intended for us. It is not prideful to say, "I am cold, so I am going to put on a jacket." That is not prideful, it is ingrained in our humanity to have some mechanisms that are there to help us, to guide us, and so self-love in this respect is not sinful.

- I want to be healthy.
- I want to be happy.
- I want to have some things in my life.
- I want to enjoy a vacation or two, I like the beach, I like the mountains, and that is not a bad thing.

None of those are sinful acts in and of themselves. But some people do not seem to have those mechanisms. Some people have suggested to me, “What about somebody that would be willing to take their own life in suicide?” First, I want just to acknowledge that that is a terrible aspect of life, it is a sad truth that we live in, and I want to suggest to you that that they are in dark places, and although many of them do not know it, the unknown on the other side of this life is more appealing to them than what they are in now. So, they take that action to find out what is on the other side of life, so they commit suicide. That is a *terrible* thing. They are hoping for something better than what they are experiencing.

Illustration:

Some of you may know this about me but for twelve years prior to getting into full-time ministry I worked as an athletic trainer in high schools. I remember one afternoon I was sitting in my office; school was about to let out and as was a custom, all the kids started coming in. The athletic director came in. She usually did not at this time of day because we were pretty crowded. She pulled a young girl into my office and said that she had just explained to her that she had received a phone call from her father, and that her brother who was also an athlete at the school had just been found dead in in their garage. You can see in those moments the crumbling of the world that this girl had, visibly right there in front of me, a desperately upset young girl. She finally made it to the main office to get picked up by her mother. Later, it was found out that this this young man suffered from depression, and he did not feel accepted by his peers. So, what he did was, he looked to take his life. Whatever was on the other side of death had to be better than what he was living.

Now, I am in no way saying that this is anything other than sad but that it is a form of avoiding pain and seeking something better, a self-love. In fact, that this apart of life which is terrible where people think something else will be better. As your pastor, in any way shape or form, this describes you, do not hesitate for a moment to talk to somebody, if not me, if not a deacon, somebody else. Because the cloud of darkness will lift. It just does and it takes time and effort, and sometimes it takes somebody to walk with you in that situation.

Let me go back to our passage. How are we to love ourselves? Loving ourselves is probably the starting point we should all agree on. But that should not be much of a controversy right now, honestly. All creation seeks its own self-love. Animals kill other animals to feed themselves. Even a mighty tree's roots will absorb all the moisture that falls from the sky even if it is at a detriment to other plants around it. It is the life we all seek to have—self-preservation. The mechanism within us, which we do not know all of them to be honest with you, is to have this self-love and self-preservation in such a way. But the Lord says love your neighbor. Well, how are we to love our neighbor? Now we can agree that the neighbor has similar things. They are self-lovers, and they seek similar things like clothing, and food, and enjoyment, and avoidance of pain. We can agree on those issues but they are different people.

People still like different things, we do not all like the same thing, and that is okay. My mother will never live in Texas for a particular reason. She honestly struggles in Colorado at times because she hates snakes. In fact, when I was younger, we had this big field behind our house and it was awesome because you know it was a quiet little neighborhood, but every now and then a snake would sneak into our backyard. Now we

did not get very many dangerous snakes. Most of them were those small little garter snakes, but momma was not having it. If there was a snake in her yard, one or two things had to happen. Somebody was going to escort that snake out of the yard, or somebody was going to escort that snake's head off its body. Those were the two options. She did not like that the snake that had the audacity to come into the yard. So, she has a fear of snakes and yet some others have them as pets; they are different people and they like different things.

Others like to watch particular sports and yet others find it a waste of time to watch those sports. Some people like to run for exercise, other people would rather place a hot poker in their eye. It is just how people are different; we do not know them like we know ourselves. They could be weird, difficult, or hard to understand, so we have loving ourselves and then loving our neighbors. But then the Lord does something here, he puts this massive word to connect the two. He says you shall love your neighbor as yourself, a small two letter word here, that is a massive word, maybe not in stature but in meaning. So, we understand what it means to love ourselves, we know what it means to love a neighbor, we kind of understand, but love them *as* ourselves.

Well, that is different. How do we understand that? Let us look at the New Testament to understand this. Let us look in John chapter 13:31-35. "When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one

another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Just a few verses ago, standing in front of his disciples, Judas just set into motion one of the greatest betrayals in all of human history. The last few days of Jesus’s life is upon us and Judas about to start the final countdown of Jesus life. Jesus comes back to his disciples just as Judas leaves and he speaks,

“Little children while I am with you will seek me.”

So, Jesus here is saying that how do people know that you are my disciple?

Right now.

How will they know that you are following me?

Before they could see it where Jesus goes, I go,

Jesus goes to the temple; his disciples follow him.

Jesus goes to Galilee; his disciples follow him.

How do you know that you are my disciples, you follow me, first, Jesus says, but then he says, “Where I am going you cannot come, you no longer will be able to physically follow me anymore” as he says in verse 34 and 35. He then answers the question about how they will know if they are still a disciple of Jesus. If you cannot follow him physically, he says, “This a new commandment I have given you—that you love one another just as I have loved you.” You also are to love one another [loudly with passion] *by this all people will know that you are my disciple if you have love for one another.*

“If” is another big word. If you have love for one another. Jesus is saying this to his disciples. To have people know that you follow me [Jesus], you have to love one another. That is a strong statement. People have asked the questions:

- What is a mark of a disciple?
- What is a follower of Christ?
- How can you have evidence of it?

It is not just physical evidence of them following Jesus, it is also evidence in their display for loving one another, by this, all people will know that “you are my disciple.”

They will know it by how we care for one another, inside this church, and other Christians. That is how he will know if you love one another. Church, we are to follow Christ, we are to come to a saving faith in Jesus, and we will follow him—not physically, but spiritually. But to be honest with you, salvation is the easy part—you repent and believe. But being a disciple of Jesus—that is hard—because you have to love people that are unlovable. You have to love people that do things that are not kind, which are not good within the church walls. Jesus says for us to love one another as I have loved you, I think it is important to realize that this is not a command to copy Jesus, this is not a command to copy Jesus’s love in the same way, because we cannot do that. What Jesus did, we cannot, because he loved us so much that he died on the cross to atone for our sins. Now, I love my wife Rebecca, I love my boys, but I cannot die to atone for their sins.

We cannot come across copying the exact same love but what it is saying is we are to lay down our lives for one another.

John 15:13: "...greater love has no other than this that someone lays down his life for his friend."

In 1 John 3:16: "...by this we know love that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down ours for the brothers." Now I am not going to go through a sermon talking about what it means to lay down your life for one another. Most of us understand that it is not just a physical action—I give up my life for you, we know that it is through acts of service [to one another]. We know about that through ministries of various kinds, some of them big, some of them small, but we are not going to walk through that today.

But the point is, Jesus is not saying to copy my love. He is saying "...come along with me" in his love for them. Do everything you can for "them," because what does Jesus say in John 5:9? He says, "...as the father has loved me, so have I loved you, abide in my love." Abide in my love—abiding in love does not mean copy. The vine cannot abide in the branch by just copying it to be a branch. It "abides" by joining into the love they are sharing in the same aspect.

Listen church, love is not a passive notion. It is an active participation. You have to actively love somebody. When you show love to somebody, in this matter it is not just a person you are loving, but you are also displaying Christ's love, and abiding in it through loving them, not imitation—but abiding love. We are to love one another. That is why gossip and slander within the church is so devastating. It is a devastating thing. Because of this fact, Christ, on the night he was betrayed, he tells his disciples, both then and now, if you want to show that you belong to me, if you want to show the world that you are a follower of Christ, that you follow biblical teaching, that you are a God fearing Christian—the first thing you must do is love one another as I have loved you.

So, to answer your question how does a Christian love himself? Let us look back at Leviticus 19:18 when it says, “How do we love others as ourselves,” we are to love ourselves in that mirror of abiding in Christ’s love and showing our representation of the love that he has given us. How do we give it to others? Jesus loves you to the point of death on the cross, Jesus loves you to the point to change your heart—he loved you to the point that you are a new creation, the old has passed away, Jesus loves you to the point that he came to fulfill the law and bring salvation to those that believe in him. So much love he is giving you. Let us join in that and show others love as well. So, how much do you love yourself? You love yourself to the point that you are *abiding* in Christ’s love that he has for you. We love one another in such a way that this world does not understand it. The world finds that kind of love foolish. The world will find that kind of love and they will see the unity of it. Around the earth and the globe, they will be repulsed by it *and* drawn to it at the same time.

That is the love that Christ has shown us. So, how do we love? We silently convict people with the way we love one another. That is in a book that the deacons and I are reading *Devoted to God church* by Sinclair Ferguson. We are to convict people not just by the words of the Bible but how we live our life. That is how we love other Christians, but not all of our neighbors are going to be Christians, not all of them are going to be called to follow Jesus.

So how in the world do we love those that in some places are called our enemies? Should we look at a very popular parable I think—and this is a parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10:29-37: “...but he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “and who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho

and he fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him, and departed leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite when he came to the place and saw the man pass by on the other side, But a Samaritan who was on a journey came to where he was and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds pouring on oil and wine, and he sent him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him “take care of him and whatever more you spend, I will pay you when I come back.” Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “You go and do likewise.”

I think it is very important for us to look at this passage in a way of love, care, and compassion. It is hard to look at this passage and not see what we talked about two weeks ago where Jesus is not telling us to love those that are different from us. If you do not understand this passage, I would suggest that you look into how the Jews and the Samaritan people saw each other—they hated one another. It would be a very interesting study, but they hated each other. They did not have a connection at all—they mutually hated each other. The Bible shows this over and over again.

In John 4:9, the Samaritan woman said to him, “How is this that you a Jew, asked for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman, for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans?”

In John 8:48, Jesus had just told them these Pharisees that they are of their father the devil and so they are not too pleased with him, and so they say “are we not right in

saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon,” they do not like each other and yet do not pass over this too quickly that these two groups hate each other.

Jesus is trying to break down those barriers by the woman at the well or the Good Samaritan. Jesus makes the Good Samaritan the hero. In this story, there are two different people groups, and they do not like each other. This Samaritan is the hero, not the Levite, nor the priest—those that you would think would be good to a neighbor, but the Samaritan—

So, let us take a look. The first thing I think you want to do when it comes to treatment of your neighbors is that you have to *acknowledge them*. But a Samaritan as he journeyed came to where he was and when he saw him [his neighbor], he had compassion. He saw him and had compassion, he acknowledged him, he recognized him, he wanted to care for him. He *wanted* to care for him. How can you recognize people when you feel hungry, and you want to eat? Well, you want that desire for those people to be able to eat as well. You get cold, you put on a jacket, you want those around you to be able to put on a jacket when they get cold. You have a job to support your family, and you want those to find a job to support their family. We do this without envy in our hearts, we want the best for people—and by the way, the Good Samaritan has not even said a word yet, because it does not take a lot to acknowledge people. It does not take a lot to see them for who they are, it is a heart issue so some of the most difficult things for us to do is to desire good for people. I mean we do not desire for them bad; I mean imagine hell—we are not desiring that they go to hell—but are you desiring that they know the name of Jesus? So, I would urge you to pray for those around you that do not know Jesus. Pray that they get their needs met, that they seek your faith, because your

faith will connect them with Jesus. Show them through your love and kindness—Christ’s love in effect, your desires are to be passed on to them, all your wants and needs, you want for them to be met.

Second thing, is to “*act as*” in verse 34, “...he went to him, bound up his wounds pouring on oil and wine then he sent him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him.” He recognized his needs, struggles, issues, and he took the steps to meet them. There are people who will drive by a mother struggling to get into her car, the diaper bag has fallen over and a whole bunch of stuff, who knows what is in diaper bags these days, that just falls all over the place trying to get two kids in the car. Hey, you can pull over and help her out. You can work on that rough day for her. You can find a couple that is fighting next door and you take an opportunity to take over a box of cookies and invite them over to dinner, so that you can minister to them. Because a relationship will help, you can be friends, you can be a neighbor to them. Or maybe you are driving by on a Sunday morning and your neighbor’s car is in the driveway. When you come back, his car is still in the driveway. If you go to church, you return from church, and you know they probably are not even awake yet. You can walk over and invite them to church, loving them and advocating for them. When people have a relationship with people, they can help have a relationship and act upon that relationship.

Now the third one is the hardest. The third aspect is to *do whatever it takes* and “...the next day he took two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper saying take care of him and whatever more you spent I will pay you when I come back.”

- What steps need to be taken to help your neighbor?
- What can you do to help in their circumstances?

Maybe they just need a babysitter to get away for a moment, maybe they have car trouble and need help, maybe they have trouble finding a job or they have health issues that they cannot talk to anybody about. So, you get into a relationship with them and instead of just being a neighbor, you become a friend, and allow them to express those issues with you. Maybe they are dealing with the disability or special needs of a loved one or themselves. So, I need somebody to help, are you going to pretend that they do not exist? Are you going to walk on the other side of the road? Just walk on by them as if blissfully ignorant of the situation, thinking that their issues are not my concern? Let me tell you, the priest, and the Levite as they pass by, their life changed zero. They probably did not even think about this again. It is a parable, yes, but they are going to move on and they are not going to consider this man again. They do not care what happens to him so their life changes zero, blissfully ignorant of what would happen to him.

You can claim ignorance, but your heavenly Father would not, because He has seen you on the side of the road, dripping with the stains of sin, washed up, and he could have no use for you, whatsoever, he could have walked by you and never taken at another moment, and it would not have changed. God and His perfect plan at all—it would not change in the slightest but, instead, he *did whatever it took*, He sent his son Jesus. Jesus left heaven to live among us. Christ lived a perfect life, died a perfect death, rose again three days later, winning the perfect battle over sin and death. He left perfect instructions. In Scripture he says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Because God found you worthy, He did whatever it took for you, and this done on our behalf by Christ, we should share his love. We are to do whatever it takes for those around us.

First show that as a disciple of Christ, you love the church, you love the people the church, you love Christians. Second, is that you have to learn to be that Good Samaritan, you have to acknowledge your neighbor, you have to take actions for your neighbor, and you have to do whatever it takes for your neighbor.

So, what does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself it means doing whatever it takes to show love?

Let us Pray:

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the blessings you provided and will continue to provide. We thank you that you have provided perfect love to us, help us Lord to give others the type of love that you need for us. Bless those in our lives that we love, bless those in our lives that we struggle to understand, and help us Lord, to be the light to the world we so desire to be. Give us strength to love, as you have commanded us to love. In Jesus name Amen.

Sermon 6: Matthew 22:34-40: The Greatest Command

If you will join me in Matthew Chapter 22 today, we will conclude our series entitled “In His Image.” Now, the point of the entire series was to provide a biblical, contextual, evidence of God with how He created everyone in His image. That includes people that deal with special needs or disabilities. We have walked through passages such as Proverbs 31:8-9 where we discussed how we have to diligently speak up for those that cannot speak up for themselves we talked about special needs and disabilities about loving people and how pro-life means from womb to tomb and our responsibilities in that walk.

We discussed John 9:1-7 we recognize the blind man that got healed and how Christ did it, he recognized that he had an issue, he saw that the blind man was seeking a place full of others and people that were generous and desire to have safe place to deal with their particular issues.

In Luke 14:1-24, we saw that there are two parables; the wedding guest and the great banquet. We talked about how that should be our center in understanding a Christ-centered hospitality. It should be our example in hospitality, and we saw that we should have no expectations of people that come through the door. We should invite those that are different from us, and we should seek everyone in the Great Commission. Then, of course, the last two Sundays we have gone through Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. In Deuteronomy 6:5, we of course discussed how Christians are to walk and have a relationship with God, how to love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all of your might.

We recognize the importance of us wanting to get there even though we cannot fully get to that point because we are broken individuals, we are sinful individuals. That is why we need a Savior to get us to that point, but we strive to do so anyway.

Last week we talked about loving our neighbor as ourselves and the elements of what self-love is, in a non-sinful way, but we all have elements of self-love, and how we love others. If we are to love others, how we display our love for Christ in the same manner.

Finally, we are here looking at this last passage where Jesus is asked the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” Before we get there, it is hard to really look at this question without understanding the context of everything behind it. The last several chapters here in Matthew reveal a lot to us. This is the Wednesday before Christ was crucified. This is during the Passover week or the passion week. It is on the Wednesday that this question is asked,

Monday—But Jesus on Monday was being heralded at the temple. Maybe he is the Messiah, maybe he is at least a prophet, we know he is something, we just do not know what yet, so he was heralded in hopes that he was the Messiah.

Tuesday—Then on Tuesday he entered the temple as they had hoped that he would, hoping he would come in and reveal God’s plan on how to deal with their issues at hand, which mostly was the Roman, occupancy over them. In the rule over them, they were hoping Jesus had a plan, but instead, what he did was he drove out the money changers. Passover week is their big money grab, this is where they can increase their finances. So, he pushes them out. Then what does he do? He rebukes them and says that they turn God house into a “den of robbers.”

Wednesday—So now it is Wednesday and he comes back to the temple to preach about the coming Kingdom. In verse 21, he has two parables about the Kingdom of God and who will enter into it. He also tells a parable about who is not going to enter heaven and at the end of it, do you remember the chief priest and the Pharisees what they realized? They say, “Well he is speaking about us...” and so the tension between the spiritual leaders and Jesus is growing. It is getting to a point of no return, really at the boiling point. He already came in and drove out the money changers which caused them a financial hardship. But now he continually preaches against them and so now they have to do something about it. They just cannot let this continue but what did they fear? They feared Christ’s popularity—his following was growing more and more as the days went on and so they feared them.

So, what do they do? They hatched a plan. They designed some questions to try to trick Jesus into discrediting himself and so first up were the Pharisees.

Pharisees—they asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” That is an interesting question because their assumption is He is the Son of God, if he claims to be that then he is not going to bow down to Roman authority. He is going to say, “no you do not pay taxes to Caesar”—which was their expectation. In addition to that, they knew that most of his followers are anti-Rome for the most part. They are anti-Rome and so they know if Jesus says, “Yes, pay taxes,” he is going to discredit himself from his followers. So, they hatched this plan. It is not a theological question, it is not a biblical question, rather it is a political question. So, they asked him, and they knew the moment [their expectation] he stated that you should not pay taxes to Caesar, they could entrap him with Roman authority. They could send spies out to Rome to report him and what would

Rome do in this situation? They would send some people out to kill Jesus as an insurrectionist, as a leader of a rebellion against them. So, in effect, they want Jesus to incriminate himself and have Rome do the dirty work of killing him. That is what they are hoping for. But Jesus, in his answer says, "...give Caesar what is Caesar's and give God the things that are God's." That is a brilliant answer. So, their plan with the first question did not work. Now the Sadducees are up next.

Sadducees—look at Matthew 22:33 in your Bible, you can understand that is the Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection—it says it right there—they ask him this really weird question about a man who has a wife, and he dies with no children and his brother marries his wife and then he dies, and the cycle continues through all seven brothers. Then they say, "Well, whose wife is she at the resurrection?" Now, if you know anything about your Bible, the Pharisees and the Sadducees are not friends with one another; they are both leaders in the community but they disagree on a lot. This question, I am certain, was asked to the Pharisees and they did not know how to answer that question. They had no idea how to answer—this question is a theological question that the Sadducees came up with.

What it is designed to do again is to discredit Jesus as a prophet and as a man of God. Where the Pharisees tried to discredit him and have him killed by Rome—what the Sadducees are doing is trying to discredit his scriptural understanding. Jesus' response is that "You are neither married nor given in marriage at the resurrection." Once again, Christ responds to a question designed to discredit him and Jesus answers brilliantly.

Pharisees—That leads us directly into our passage. Starting in verse 34: "...but when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. One

of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher what is the great commandment in the law, and he [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your mind.” This is a great first commandment. The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend on all the Law and the Prophets.”

The Pharisees are back in the game, if you will, they want to ask this third question. They notice that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. This had to be a little bit of a happy moment for the Pharisees because they do not like the Sadducees, but literally this word in Greek to “silence” means “to be gagged,” it is also used in Mark 1:25 where Jesus silences the demon where it says “...but Jesus rebuked him saying, “Be silent and come out of him.” Also, in Mark 4:34, when Jesus silenced the storm, Paul uses it also in 1 Corinthians 9 when he talks about muzzling an ox.

So, this word is not just “silenced.” Matthew uses it saying Jesus muzzled the Sadducees—it is an unwilling forced silence—they could not speak because of the brilliance of his words. Then at the end of verse 34, there comes some critical few words: “They gathered together.” They gathered together. Scripture is not always prophetic in obvious ways, but I think it is prophetic in a lot of ways that I think we miss. If we do not know our Bible, we miss things. In Psalm 2:2, it says this: “The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against the anointed.” I believe that in Psalm 2:2 when it is talking about “taking council together” it is speaking about this [particular] week, it is speaking about this moment where the Pharisees gathered together. Because if we look at it, they do not know what is going on, they do not know how to take down Jesus as they are planning. So, they have to take

counsel with one another to come up with a plan. As Acts 4:26 quotes Psalm 2:2, that is where we get a better understanding of Psalm 2:2. It quotes it, and then in verse 27 of Chapter 4 says, "...for truly in these in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." Acts is pointing back to this week. Where Psalms 2:2 is pointing forward to this week, Acts 4 is pointing back to this week.

So, they are gathering together looking at how to attack Jesus. They say he is already bested us with our political question, he is bested the Sadducees with their theological question. A lawyer comes up now, why would Matthew pull this man out independently, because throughout Matthew already he is used the word "scribe" which already means an expert of the law. But he uses a different word here to bring out the word lawyer, so the question is, why does Matthew do this? I think it is pretty clear. It sends a clear message that this man is incredibly knowledgeable of the law, and it probably surpasses even the Scribes. He is the best of the best; he is the most knowledgeable of them all. But what is a lawyer in biblical times? He is a man that knows both the law of God and law of man.

Hebrew tradition always thinks that the law of God should infuse the law of men and we would believe that too, that it should infuse the law of man so it would be very important for this man to know both the laws of God and the laws of man. This is very important now, church people miss this, and I do not want you to miss it, I want to think about it for a moment, who is the one person, the main human figure that wrote God's law? Moses is face to face with God, Moses wrote God's law, he wrote the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. If you go to a Jewish temple today, you know what their number one hero of their faith would be: Moses.

So do not mess around with Moses when it comes to Jewish traditions. Therefore, their next approach is: “We want Jesus to say something against Moses, or the Mosaic law.” That is what they are trying to get Jesus to do, they want him to say something controversial against either Moses or the Mosaic law. By the way, it would have worked, and it would have worked quickly. The moment Jesus said anything against Moses or the Mosaic law, it would have turned many, many, of his followers away from him. But they did not understand Jesus at all because Jesus has been very sensitive to their love of Moses for a long time. In fact, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus in Matthew 5 says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away not one iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

Jesus was already sensitive to Moses and the Mosaic law because he knows that people hold Moses very high in their understanding. When he is asked that question, they are attacking his biblical traditions. What does Jesus do? He answers with the two verses we talked about over the last two weeks: Deuteronomy 6:5, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Now some people have a problem with all your mind. Instead, in Deuteronomy 6:5, “With all of your might,” so the question is, is that a problem to us as well? We have to understand that there are different languages. One is Hebrew in the Old Testament, and one is Greek. They have different words that overlap with one another. In essence, both the Hebrew “the mighty” and the Greek “the mind” are saying that God has blessed you with energy, with wisdom, with strength, with abilities, with talent, you have to use it for God. That is what these words mean and so the entire passage here that Jesus is talking

about, and Deuteronomy is talking about, is a person's entire essence, everything about them, Everything about you and me should love God. Then Jesus says the second is like the first in Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself." We know that Paul is huge on this in Galatians 5:14-15: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word. You shall love your neighbor as yourself but if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another."

So, the lawyer is trying to discredit him and Jesus quotes potentially the two most popular verses that Moses ever wrote. Genius, that is fantastic, he quotes Deuteronomy 6:5—the Shema right—in Jewish tradition they recite that twice a day; even today they recite Deuteronomy 6:5 twice a day. That is the heart, which is the core of their belief, Deuteronomy 6:5. Now Paul says that it is Deuteronomy 6:5 that they might be justified by faith. He had a big discussion about that. Not only that but if you go to a Jewish home or a Jewish temple, they will have that little box right next to their door, I forget the name of that box I am going off my head so if I am wrong, I am sorry I think it is called a Mezuzah. But do you know what is in that box? Deuteronomy 6:5 and potentially other Torah laws, but 6:5 is going to be in there no matter what because it is so important to them. Deuteronomy itself, the entire book is about loving God and *how* to love God. It is just broken up into sections throughout the book and it is really detailed. That is what Deuteronomy is about. Guess what Leviticus is about? Leviticus is about holiness throughout the entire book. It is about holiness and how are you to be holy. A massive part of that is how we treat one another and how we love one another.

It is like the first, you cannot have one without the other, you cannot love God and hate man, you cannot love man and hate God. Let us look at 1 John 4:20-21 says, "...if

anyone says I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” In this commandment we have, “...for him whosoever loves God must also love his brother. “Now, I know people are going to argue—”Well, you can love man and hate God.” People do that all the time. The problem is that they do not understand what love we are talking about. Here, this is a divine love and so the problem of having a divine love and not being able to understand it. I cannot love somebody just through physical, emotional, or mental actions that is not divine love, because I am missing something. If I am to love God with all of my essence and then I am to love a neighbor like it as well, which means I love them physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. If you do not add that spiritual love in there, if you do not care for them spiritually, you are missing everything. In fact, Scripture will probably tell you that you hate them if you do not love them spiritually.

Jesus, he ends the whole thing by saying that these depend on all the Law and the Prophets. That is a powerful statement, if you think about the Old Testament, he is basically saying all of it wraps up into these two commandments—all of it.

What are the laws of Hebrews? Now, it is broken up for us in the Ten Commandments, right?

That is the law of the Hebrews broken up.

1. You shall have no other God before me, well that is loving God.
2. You shall make no idols that is also loving God.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord that is loving God.
4. Keep the Sabbath day holy loving God.

The first four are all about loving God what are the next six about?

5. Honor your father and mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against, your neighbor
10. You shall not covet.

That is all about loving others. Paul says this for the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery, you should not murder, should not steal, you should not covet”—and any other commandments are summed up in these words: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law. Christ just said that all of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament are fulfilled by those two commandments. There may be aspects to each one but Church, if Christ can stand before us and he can say that these are the critical aspects of a Christian walk, how do we not do those two things?

- What would stop us as a church if we did do those things?
- What would prevent us from loving anybody with a disability?
- What would stop us from loving somebody with Down syndrome?
- What would hinder our ministry to them?
- What kind of behavior would cause a leader of a church to walk up to a parent with an autistic kid and say, “You have got to stay home?”

- What unique issues does somebody with ADHD or seizure disorder or SPD or any other disorder what would their issues have to be for the church to stand between them and their worship?
- What would it have to be?

Those are the questions that need to be asked because Jesus is saying that all the laws following these two commandments because if we follow these two commandments what could stop us?

I want you to understand this. If I love others like this, would I even need a law, I mean think about it, if I am lost in your needs, if I am lost in your hurts and your pain and your lost in mine is there a more pure love that anyone can give another. If I trust God and I am doing everything I can to love him with all my heart, with all my soul, all my mind you know what flows out of that? Loving you, that is what flows out of that.

Nothing can hinder that, that also means I love you in a similar fashion.

I love the lost with all of my heart,

I love special needs with all of my soul,

I love the disabled with all of my might,

I love this church with all of my strength,

I love those that are different from me with all of my mind,

I love you with all of my essence.

Now it is different from loving God, because God is our Lord, he is our Savior, so we love him differently and more than others but it is like it, it is like it. It is not perfect I cannot love you perfectly, but I cannot love God perfectly either. We cannot so when we

grasp the concepts of loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Church there is no place that God would not take you as individuals or as a church:

There is no ministry that a person or a church cannot handle,

There is no place in Wiggins that cannot be reached,

There is no place in the Colorado that cannot be impacted,

There is no state that cannot hear the name of Jesus in this country,

There is no person that cannot repent and believe in the gospel,

There is no lost or safe person in the world that would not be influenced but this kind of love.

The theological term for this kind of love is called dual aspect of love because you have to love both, you either love both or you love neither. I either love my neighbor and God or I do not love either of you.

That is what it is saying, do you know what happened to that lawyer? Well it does not tell you in Matthew but the parallel verse in Mark 12 says this: “and the Scribe said to him, “You are right teacher, you have truly said that he is one and there is no one besides him and to love him with all of your heart and with all your understanding and for all your strength and to love one’s neighbor as oneself is much more than burnt offerings and sacrifices and when Jesus saw that he answered wisely he said to him you are not far from the Kingdom of God and after that no one dared to ask him anymore questions.”

You are right, not only doing Jesus avoid discrediting himself, but he answered with absolute authority, he answered all of God’s desires for us summed up here in a variety of different ways, but they are all summed up here. He has laid out a Christian life

and expectations in these two commandments and in doing so, no one dared ask another question.

Church, I do not want to lie to you. Ministry is hard. Any kind of ministry takes energy, it takes compassion, it takes heart, it takes all of you, but that is what God's love is, so no matter the ministry:

Music ministry,

Media ministry,

Children's ministry,

Youth ministry or adult ministry,

No matter the ministry it takes *all of you*. That is why so many pastors, church, leaders, elders deacons have disappointed me so greatly in the past because they do not love like this. So when we speak about "*speaking up for those that cannot speak up for themselves*" or "*recognizing and taking action for those dealing with special issues and with special needs*" or when it talks about "*Christ-centered hospitality as individuals or as a church*" or when we learn "*to love God with all of our heart, with all of our mind, with all of our soul, and we learn to love others as we love ourselves*" you know what we are doing? We are loving God with all of our heart, with all of our minds, with all of our souls, and we are loving others as ourselves.

Can there be a greater goal for Christian? Can there be a greater goal? That is the apex. That is the goal. Those two commands, that is where we want to strive, and everything is built around that. So, no matter the color, or race, or ethnic background, or cultural background, different upbringing, disability, a special needs, it does not matter. We are all sinners in need of grace and in need of Jesus.

The reason for that is because we are all made in His image.

Let us Pray:

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for reminding us that we are sinners in need of grace. Lord as we seek to reach others, to recognize others, speak up for others, we ask that you give us an understanding of how to love you, with all of our heart, soul, and mind. Also, how to love others as we love ourselves. Please give us a strength moving forward in all these areas of our life. In Jesus name Amen.

APPENDIX 7
MINISTRY PLAN

The Ministry Plan takes elements from chapter 3 and chapter 4 regarding implementation. These chapters should be referenced when looking for more details regarding each stage.

Stage 1 Cultivate Culture

- Create a welcoming environment
 - o Preaching and Teaching a Sermons series
 - o Strong Leadership Support

Stage 2 Create Preparedness

- Organizational preparedness church
 - o Find emotional obstacles of the church
 - o Find physical obstacles of the church (see example checklist on p. 200)
 - Find sensory output
 - o Find spiritual obstacles of the church
- Willing members
 - o Teach about special needs ministry
 - o Teach about special needs itself
 - o Teach about helping families and communication of with special needs families
- Welcoming environment
 - o “Door to Door Care”
 - Welcomers

- In-service care
- Follow up care

Stage 3 Training Volunteers

- Special needs and disability training, more intense than willing members, is likely for leaders of the ministry.
 - Types of Special Needs
 - Communication with family
 - Physical Needs
- Over coming obstacles

Stage 4 Invite and implement

- Make known to association and groups
 - Advertise to groups about your ministry
 - Work the word-of-mouth movement in special needs circles
- Start program

Stage 5 Keep Ministry in Forefront

- Highlighted
 - Make sure Special Needs families have good impression
 - Highlight ministry often (show importance)
 - Special updates with more focus on successes

Physical Obstacles Example Check List

This check list is designed to guide you through examples of some physical issues within the church. It is not an exhaustive list and other items may need to be check within the church. Please check with your local area for exact specifications to be ADA compliant.

- Number of handicap spaces for your parking lot. (1 Handicap spot for every 25 spaces).
- Clearly visible signs directing people to accessible entrance.
- Proper signs directing those with disabilities and special needs to the correct entrance?
- Handicap accessible entrance (Ramp, handrails, no-step entryway).
- Elevator doors must be minimum of 36' wide
- Elevator buttons must be mounted at height of 42'
- Bathroom accessibility
 - Stall size
 - Toilet seat height
 - Grab bars
 - Sink height
 - Soap dispenser
 - Paper towel dispenser
 - Mirror height
- Sensory sensitive individuals
 - Cry Room or quiet area
 - Lights and sound effects
 - Unpleasant smells
- Proper changing tables
- Seating in classrooms or sanctuary for handicap individuals

APPENDIX 8

MINISTRY PLAN RUBRIC

The following rubric was used to evaluate the Ministry Plan developed by the author and distributed to the select expert panel described in the goal section of chapter 1.

Ministry Plan Evaluation Rubric					
1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Biblical Accuracy					
Each aspect of the plan was sound in its interpretation of Scripture.					
Each aspect of plan was faithful to the theology of the bible.					
Scope					
The content of the plan sufficiently covers each issue was designed to address.					
The plan sufficiently covers a biblical pedagogical methodology.					
Pedagogy					
Each aspect of the plan was clear, containing a big idea.					
Each plan provides application for participant to understand about the material.					
Practicality					
Each aspect of the plan clearly details how to develop a Ministry Plan to teach the Bible.					
At the end of the plan, participants will be able to better teach others the Bible.					

APPENDIX 9
SUMMIT BAPTIST CHURCH INDIVIDUAL
SPIRITUAL PLAN

Sample:

Stage 1: Questionnaire

1. What is the nature of your family members disability?
2. Is there anything specific that Summit can do to make their time more pleasant?
3. Is there anything specific that Summit can do to make your time more pleasant?
4. What kind of things does your family member like?
5. What kind of things does your family dislike?
6. Is there any allergy we should be aware of?
7. Is there any restrictions Summit should be aware of with your family member?
8. Does he/she need any assistance from Summit that can help facilitate their experience?
9. Are there any sensory issues that Summit should be aware of?
10. Will he/she learn better in a particular environment? (i.e., quiet room, small class room, ext.)
11. In case of your family member becoming overwhelmed how can Summit best handle that situation?
12. Can your family member participate in all activities?
 - a. If no, please let us know the restrictions
13. Does your family member need one on one help throughout their visit?
14. Do you need anything additional from Summit?
15. If there is anything else Summit should be aware of, please let us know.

Stage 2: Create Plan for Family

A pastor, teacher, and the family of the individual with the disability or special need will meet and formulate a plan based on the information derived from the stage 1 Questionnaire.

This plan will include but is not limited to:

- 1) Teaching plan to the individual
 - a) Including Sunday School lessons
 - b) Activities
- 2) Sermon Viewing Experience
 - a) Sound Level
 - b) Visual stimulation level
 - c) Quiet Room Accessible
- 3) Ministry Opportunities
 - a) For special needs or disabled family member
 - b) For family members without disabilities or special needs
- 4) Extra Event Planning
 - a) Event planning for future events to include the family and the special needs individual
- 5) Break Down Care
 - a) How to deal with family members overstimulation and breakdown issue
- 6) Special Accommodations
 - a) Any additional accommodations that need to be made for this specific individual and their family.

Stage 3: Implementation

- 1) Implementation of the stage 2 plan designed for the specific individual and their family is executed.

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ABSTRACT

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR REACHING SPECIAL NEEDS FAMILIES THROUGH SUMMIT BAPTIST CHURCH IN WIGGINS, COLORADO

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022
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The purpose of this project was to establish biblical foundations for special needs individuals and families in the church and create a reproducible format for this ministry so other local churches can begin to reach their special needs community. The Scripture presents essential principles for showing grace to the special needs community. Practical application for Special Needs Ministry is difficult, it requires both support for the special needs individual and support for the special needs family themselves. Distributing surveys to special needs families and local churches provided feedback to understand where the local church is disconnected from the special needs community. Examining the surveys from both Special Needs Families and from local churches provided the data needed to discover the process in connecting special needs families and their local church.

VITA

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EDUCATION

BA, Metropolitan State College of Denver, 2004

MDiv, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013

MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Senior Pastor, North Hills Baptist Church, Marietta, Ohio, 2017-2018

Church Planter, Riverside Baptist Church, Marietta, Ohio, 2018-2020

Senior Pastor, Summit Baptist Church, Wiggins, Colorado, 2020-