

State Of The Union

*I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last
(John 15:16. NRSV)*

“Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” ’ (Luke 13:8-9. NRSV)

*¹⁹If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.
(Deuteronomy 8:19-20. NRSV)*

State Of The Union: This Church

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Hebrews 12:1-2

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles to Hebrews 12:1-2; I want to show you something:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also **lay aside every weight** and **the sin that clings so closely**, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, **looking to Jesus** the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (NRSV)

The Bible teaches that in order to follow Jesus into the fullness of his purpose and plan, you have to first enter into a season of disentanglement. Jody and I are both part of the Arrow Mafia, and the Arrow leadership process is actually designed around this Biblical principal. The program begins with something they call “Freeing Up”. The leaders and facilitators help the students cut ties with addictions, fears, bad habits or patterns that are keeping them from living out their full calling. In fact, since Jody, you are familiar with this process, let me borrow you for a moment, to demonstrate how this works. Suppose Jody that you felt the Lord calling you to go over there, towards the stain glass window. But also suppose that the enemy had managed to sink some restraining hooks into you. He had managed to ensnare you in some addictions, bad habits, destructive mindsets, debilitating fears or ignorant opinions. (Attach bungee chords). You will struggle to move forward into God’s call. Before you can move forward you will need to deal with these hindrances. That is what I want to talk about this morning. (Jody to sit back down).

You see, I believe God has a call on us, on this tribe, that is not a reflection of our inherent value or moral superiority, it is a call rooted in God's grace, as all such calls are. It is a call to be a faithful remnant, an oasis of faithfulness in the midst of an apostate and forgetful culture. God wants to choose his people again, he wants to set them apart again and empower them again as in days of old to be a city on a hill, a light in the darkness, a BEACON calling lost people home to the Father's side. I believe that. I believe that we are living in a new day, I believe we are standing at the hinge of our calling and that we must deal with our hindrances before we cross over Jordan into the fullness of God's promise and purpose. I want to cut some chords this morning so that we can follow Jesus. I want to talk honestly and Biblically about the things that are holding us back. I'm not talking about "the North American Evangelical Church" this week; that was last week. This week I'm talking about ME. Paul David Carter. This week I'm talking about you. Its way more fun to talk about the North American Evangelical Church isn't it? We all agree, those people are CRAZY, but not me, I'm ok. Not you, you're fine. We can avoid dealing with US when we talk about THEM; but there is nowhere to hide this morning. This morning, the mirror of God's Word is pointed right here, on this house and we may not like what we are going to see.

Open your Bibles to Deuteronomy 12. I want to use this passage twice this morning because it fits so naturally with where we find ourselves. This is a sermon that Moses gave to the people just before they crossed over the Jordan to begin the conquest. They were at the hinge of their calling as they heard these words and Moses wanted to clarify some things so they could march forward unencumbered into the fullness of their calling. So this is right where we are. Look first at verses 5-8:

⁵But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there, ⁶bringing there your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill-offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. ⁷And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you. ⁸ You shall not act as we are acting here today, all of us according to our own desires (NRSV)

Hindrance #1: Privatism

If you read all the sermons of Moses in Deuteronomy you see this concern coming up again and again. Moses understood that privatism had to be stamped out of the people of God if they were to move forward into God's purpose. Here in Deuteronomy 12 he states the principal positively:

“Hey everybody, let’s all come together centrally, at a place that God designates for our worship and community time. Bring your tithes there so that the functions of the house can happen.”

Later in the same sermon he states the principle negatively, just to reinforce the teaching:

¹⁷Nor may you eat within your towns the tithes of your grain, your wine, or your oil, the firstlings of your herds or your flocks, any of your votive gifts that you vow, your freewill-offerings, or your donations; ¹⁸these you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God at the place that the Lord your God will choose, you together with your son and your daughter, your male and female slaves, and the Levites resident in your towns, rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God in all your undertakings. (Deuteronomy 12:17-18. NRSV)

“You can’t just worship any old way you want, nor can you give what is designated to God to just any old thing you want. For the kingdom of God to work we cannot act as we are today, each of us according to our own desires.” This sermon by Moses could have been written last week, amen?

Listen to me church, the number one hindrance we face in THIS CHURCH, not the North American Evangelical Church, THIS CHURCH is privatism. Everyone wants to do faith their own way, everyone wants to control their worship money and have say over their tithe. They want to designate and they want to target. The truth is, until we stop doing that we cannot move forward into the fullness of God’s call. This is a real issue friends. On a regular basis I am having conversations with people about this. They all agree that we need to be giving to the Lord’s work but they want to be in control of that. They want to bargain: “What if I give 5% here and then direct the other 5% to Christian organisations that I deeply believe in? As long as they are all doing God’s work, isn’t that ok?” No, it isn’t. We are not a victorious, powerful, effective community until we submit to the concept of community money. This isn’t Old Testament friends. I know that some people are always looking for the Old Testament “get out of jail free card” but unfortunately, this principle is even more explicit in the New Testament. Look at Acts 4:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and **no one claimed private ownership** of any possessions, but everything they owned was **held in common**. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵**They laid it at the apostles’ feet**, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and **laid it at the apostles’ feet**. (Acts 4:32-37. NRSV)

The church EXPLODED in the first generation because the first generation understood the concept of community money. When money is privatized, the kingdom of God stalls. This issue goes beyond Old Testament/New Testament, this issue is fundamental to human nature. Original sin was what? Eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that we could BE LIKE GOD DECIDING RIGHT AND WRONG FOR OURSELVES. Privatism is original sin. Money is an expression of personal choice, everyone knows this. What do we say in our culture? “Show me your check book and I will tell you who you are”. In our culture, as in every culture, we exercise choice with how we spend our money. To give up control of our money to the community is therefore the supreme declaration of submission and faith. You cannot build a community without community money. The world knows this. That is why the Government of Canada does not allow you to designate your taxes. Can you imagine if they did? Think about the chaos that would cause. In the political realm, taxes are designated as the leadership deems appropriate regardless of whether that benefits you personally. Consider property tax for example. If you are a 65 year old empty nester with no kids, it probably bugs you a little bit that you have to pay property tax to support the public school system. You have no school age kids, shouldn't your tax go towards community pools or nursing homes or something you might actually benefit from? The answer is no. A society needs schools whether you do or not so you have to pay in. If the politicians understand this, why is it that Christians don't get it? Are we not wiser than the people of this world? Will we not sit on thrones and judge the sons of this age?

If you sense that this irritates me, let me explain that this is not due to any concern for personal gain. I do not get paid by commission. Our budget has gone up by over 110% over the last two years but that does not imply a similar increase in my salary. Salary increases are determined by your elected board and have to be approved by the congregation. They have no connection to the budget increase what so ever. This irritates me because it hobbles the church, it weakens the Bride of Christ. We cannot be the church we are called to be in this city while so many of us do whatever seems right to us with our money and with our tithes. We cannot feed the widows and the orphans, we cannot build the city on the hill until we get over the issue of financial privatisation. It has weakened and hobbled the people of God since DAY ONE. It has to stop. It stopped briefly in the first generation of the church and the power of God fell on them so heavily that the Bible records:

And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, ¹⁵so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. ¹⁶A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured. (Acts 5:12-16. NRSV)

It is no accident that this report is given as a conclusion to the story on Ananias and Saphira – a couple that lied about their givings to the Lord. God dealt with them because their withholding spirit and their deceiving spirit threatened the ministry of the Kingdom. When the church puts original sin to bed and excises it completely, solving the privatism issue and releasing money joyfully and generously into the Body of Christ, the Spirit comes alive and the church is empowered unto victory.

Let me close this section with a very direct challenge. It is easier in this church to obey this principle than it was in the early church. In the early church you didn't get to affirm the budget at an annual AGM. This church is 100% open and transparent in its budget process and has a track record of generosity and selflessness in its use of money. When we receive extra money we don't go to Vegas, we invest in local ministries. That has been proven again and again. You elect the leaders that steward the budget, you have to affirm the budget they put forward. If you can't support that with your tithe then you should worship in a church that ministers in a way you approve of. Now please, I am not saying: "If you don't tithe you can't come here." I did not say that, I do not think that. I'm saying, if you are a member of this church and yet you can't support the budget with your full tithe, that suggests that you do not approve of the stewardship of your elders. I would not go to a church where I did not support the stewardship of the elders and I do not counsel you to. Go to a church that is building a version of the kingdom you believe in and INVEST yourself FULLY into it. Until we do this, we will not be the church God is calling us to be.

Hindrance #2: A "Smallness" Mindset

Flip back in Deuteronomy to chapter 9. Moses says in his sermon:

Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan today, to go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you, great cities, fortified to the heavens, ²a strong and tall people, the offspring of the Anakim, whom you know. You have heard it said of them, 'Who can stand up to the Anakim?' ³Know then today that the Lord your God is the one who crosses over before you as a devouring fire; he will defeat them and subdue them before you, so that you may dispossess and destroy them quickly, as the Lord has promised you. (Deuteronomy 9:1-3. NRSV)

In giving them this charge Moses reminded them of a time when their smallness mindset caused the promise of God to be deferred to a future generation. The people of God had stood in this place once before, a generation previous their parents had stood on the hinge of destiny and the mindset of smallness stole from them the promises of God. Do you remember this story? The people of God sent spies into the land and those spies returned to confirm that indeed the land that God was giving them was a good and prosperous land. But they went on to report:

‘The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. ³³There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.’ (Numbers 13:32-33. NRSV)

“The promises of God are great, amen, but the enemies of the promise are also great and we feel like grasshoppers caught between great and terrible things.” They fell captive to a spirit of smallness and they missed their chance to seize the promises of God! The promises were deferred to a future generation and now to that generation Moses says:

You are about to cross the Jordan today, to go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you (verse 1)

“It’s true, the enemies of promise are GREAT and they are POWERFUL but FEAR NOT!!”
You are not grasshoppers! You are children of the living God and he goes before us!

³Know then today that the Lord your God is the one who crosses over before you as a devouring fire; he will defeat them and subdue them before you, so that you may dispossess and destroy them quickly, as the Lord has promised you. (Deuteronomy 9:1-3. NRSV)

If God is for us WHO CAN BE AGAINST US? The spirit of smallness must be EXCISED from this church if we are to seize the opportunities that God has set before us. I can smell this spirit in our midst. We are AFRAID. “What if we don’t make budget?” “What if people get offended?” “What if the economy turns down?” WE ARE NOT GRASSHOPPERS and our God is a CONSUMING FIRE, what do such things have to do with us? Do you know what the most frequent command of Holy Scripture is? DO NOT BE AFRAID. Fear is the opposite of faith and it has the effect of deferring conquest. God is waiting for ONE GENERATION that will believe him for great things. I want to be that generation.

Let me show you something. Jesus said something that has intrigued theologians for 2000 years now. It's in Matthew 24:

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.
(Matthew 24:36. NRSV)

He is talking about the end of all things and he says that no one knows the day or the hour, neither the angels nor even the Son. This is odd, because he says this in the context of telling his followers to watch the signs. What is the point of watching the signs if you cannot know the day or the hour of the end? This confuses theologians as does the idea that there can be something Jesus doesn't know. How can Jesus, who is one with the Father and knows all things, NOT KNOW the time of the end? The Bible does not explicitly answer this riddle but the only answer that seems to make sense is that the hour CANNOT be known because the Father will determine it IN PARTNERSHIP with the church. You see, if it is true that God in his condescension has determined to affect his purpose through the agency of the church, then it is reasonable, even unavoidable that the timetable for the completion of this purpose will in some way be conditional upon the freely chosen obedience of the church to her marching orders. So the end cannot be known even though it is certain. It will happen. The enemies of God's purpose, already having been fully defeated by the cross will be finally displaced from the earth in some form of partnership with the people of God and therefore, the timing cannot be stated with certainty. Why then watch the signs? Because the signs indicate potential. The signs tell us that this MIGHT BE THE GENERATION where we will cross over the Jordan and fully possess the promises. All that it takes is one generation that believes God for big things. You see this explains why there have been previous generations that thought the end was near. Maybe it was. Maybe there have been previous generations who stood on the hinge of history but could not cross over because of unbelief, because of fear, because of a spirit of smallness. I don't know. But I do know that when the people of God stand in that place again, they will need to EXCISE and dispossess the spirit of smallness before they can stand against the enemies of God's purpose in the full and manifest glory of the Lord.

The other night at Elder prayer one of your Board members prayed an intriguing prayer. He said: "Lord, I believe that you want to save this city, that you want to raise up this city as a city on a hill. That this city would be a place where your name is honoured, where your law is upheld,

where your Sabbath is kept and where your poor are cared for. I know that sounds crazy Lord, but I believe it to be true.” My eyebrows lifted when I heard that prayer. My heart beat raised a little bit. That’s a sign church. I’ve been watching for that. When the leaders among the people of God begin to believe God for the impossible, you are standing on the hinge of purpose. Get behind them church!! Believe with them!!! Move forward with them and shut your ears to the spirit of smallness. This will be a saved city, every man, woman and child. The mountain of the Lord’s house will be raised up above every other mountain and the name of the Lord will be praised. By God’s grace we will see it in this generation if we walk by faith and not by sight. And all God’s people said, amen.

Hindrance #3: Complacency and Compromise

I want to show you one more. Go forward in Deuteronomy back to chapter 12. Moses says in verses 2-4:

You must **demolish completely** all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. **Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire**, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their name from their places. ⁴You shall not worship the Lord your God in such ways. (NRSV)

“When you begin to possess the land, do not be satisfied with simple victory over the enemy. Completely destroy and dispossess the enemy or you will be ensnared and led astray.” This is one of those places where our “Canadian-ness” gets in the way, doesn’t it church? The Canadian in us wants to say: “Hold it now! We can be good and victorious and excited about Jesus without being down or negative towards others. Let’s just win them over with our blessedness.” That is the Canadian way, but it is not the victorious way. Confrontation is unavoidable. Cohabitation is not an option. Compromise is not an option because it will create complacency and it will cause the promise to be deferred.

But surely this, of all things, is a uniquely Old Testament notion? Jesus said to love your enemies, not to tear down their altars and smash their pillars. Surely here, if nowhere else we encounter a place where the New Testament is very different than the Old? Do you want to guess how this turns out? Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 10. Jesus wants to clear up a little misunderstanding and so he says:

‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; **I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.**

³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,

and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

³⁶and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:34-38. NRSV)

The Gospel will divide. It does not make friends, it makes enemies, even of one’s own household. It forces the loyalty issue, it makes people decide between their God and their human friendships. It was this way at the start and it will be this way at the end. The Book Of Revelation pictures the Second Coming this way:

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. ¹³He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’. (Revelation 19:11-16. NRSV)

From the beginning of the Gospel era to its close the Kingdom of God is a sword that divides and dispossesses. That is why the Apostle Paul says:

For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ¹⁵And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? ¹⁶And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. (2 Corinthians 6:14-16. NKJV)

My friends, we have grown far too cosy with the enemy. We worship God in the ways of the Canaanites, we are led astray by our many alliances and we are heavily compromised. We must cut these ties if we are to move forward into conquest. We must seize the Sword of the Word of God and slash at these ties and false loyalties until we are completely free of them. We cannot be Canadian anymore, terrified of being labelled intolerant, paralysed by even the suggestion of confrontation. There will be confrontation between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Men in the generation of conquest. Now I’m not talking about physical violence. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, physical weapons.

⁴For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, ⁵casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-5. NKJV)

The generation that inherits the promises will be a generation that stands up and enters into violent ideological confrontation with the kingdom of lies.

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. (Matthew 11:12. NKJV)

They will stand up and declare to the high priests of radical humanism: “Your ways are wrong! The lies you speak have destroyed our world and wounded God’s creation. Your attempt to define a world without reference to its Creator has led us to calamity and collapse. We are not gods unto ourselves, we CANNOT anticipate the consequences of our own actions, we cannot be trusted to decide right from wrong for ourselves. All your laws are lies and ruin. Sit down and be silent or face the wrath of God!” We must cut ties with the spirit of compromise and peaceful coexistence if we are to be the generation of conquest.

Conclusion:

I don’t want to be afraid anymore church. I don’t want to defer - I want to obey, I want to believe. I want to believe that the kingdom of God is truly in our midst. I want to invest in it, serve in it, live in it and die in it if need be. I want to lose my life for the sake of the kingdom and find it again at the hand of Jesus. I want to live free from the spirit of smallness. I am not a grasshopper and my God is a consuming fire and no man, no spirit, no demon of hell can stand against me. We are THE CHURCH and we will believe God for the salvation of this city because the Word of God says: “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against her.” I believe that and refuse to do other. And I refuse to be comfortable in the land of my enemies. I will stand and seize the land of my enemy with violent intention and righteous zeal. I will use the weapons of our warfare to confront and violently antagonise the strongholds of my enemy until every thought, every false ideology has been stripped, mocked and triumphed over in the name of Jesus Christ. I can’t go back to the desert for another generation of wandering. I can’t defer. Zeal for the house of the Lord consumes me. And all God’s people said, AMEN.