

“WHO CAN YOU TRUST?”

Greater Pittsburgh Community Prayer Breakfast Keynote Address DR. BRUCE BICKEL March 6, 2015

Bruce: I’m really honored to be a part of this prayer breakfast with you for two primary reasons. One is because of the magnificent work of the Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation. They are one of the best kept secrets of our city. Their vital work is critical for the development of leaders currently, as well as the next generation. So I trust that you’ll recognize the magnificent work of the PLF.

The other reason I’m glad to be a part of this, and honored to do so, is because of my love for the city of Pittsburgh. I grew up in the hills of West Virginia, about ninety miles south of here, in Fairmont. Pittsburgh was the city for me, where I could come out of the hills, put my shoes on, and go to town. (*Laughter.*) And so I love Pittsburgh. And I’ve been here 28 years, and I’m very, very pleased, and very, very proud to call Pittsburgh my home.

I had the privilege of playing football with the Naval Academy, when Navy used to win. (*Laughter.*) In fact, I’m not the braggy type. (*Bruce shines his National Championship Ring - Laughter.*) But I never lost to Pitt the three years I played against them. (*Laughter.*)

Well, friends, life is a series of choices that we make. Life is a series of decisions. And each one of those decisions has consequences. It’s critical that we understand the consequences of our choices before we make them, because once you make that choice, you’re going to get the consequences that you wanted. And then, if you make those consequences what you want, and make that decision by that choice, you have no right to gripe or complain, because you got exactly what you wanted by making that choice. If you don’t want those consequences, don’t make that choice.

One of the most important questions that we will have to choose to answer is this question. Who can we trust? On what basis do you trust somebody? On what basis do you find somebody trustworthy?

If you’re single, whom do you date? Is he trustworthy? Is he really a gentleman, and treating you well? Can she be trusted?

How about the people you work with, your employers? Can you trust them? What makes them trustworthy, so you can give them your best excellence?

What are the character qualities of trustworthiness? If you’re going to go into business with somebody, a partnership, whom do you go into business with? How do you pick that person who will be the partner in your business venture?

Let me give you my definition of how you can trust somebody. You can trust somebody who will do whatever is necessary to maintain a relationship with you. In the moments I have with you today, I want to tell you why I know that I can trust God, why I know that I can trust the Person and work of Jesus Christ—His sinless perfection, His perfect obedience. I want you to know why I can trust the fact that what the Father ordains, the Son accomplishes and the Holy Spirit applies. I want you to know those

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things, because I want you to see that this is the single truth that I base my life upon. It's the fact that I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God can be trusted.

So let me tell you why I believe that, and why I'm committed to that, and why I know that. Has God done everything possible to maintain a relationship with me?

Let me take you back to the ancient Hebrew prophet Isaiah. He says these words, speaking on behalf of God. “I, even I, for My name's sake, hold back My wrath. I restrain it for you, so as not to cut you off.”

The very first thing that God does for me is this. He holds back His wrath. Now God's wrath is His personal indignation against my sinfulness and my unrighteousness.

And Isaiah says this, that He holds back His wrath, so as not to cut me off. That little word “cut me off” is a Hebrew idiom that means to have a relationship with you. If God chose not to hold back His wrath, His personal indignation against my personal sin and unrighteousness, there would be no possibility of my trusting Him, let alone having a relationship, because I would be exposed to His personal indignation against my sinfulness. The very first thing that God does for me—and I know this is the truth—He holds back His wrath, so that there might be the possibility that I can have a relationship with Him, and I can trust Him.

The second thing Isaiah tells us in a very similar passage. “I, even I, for My name's sake, remove your transgressions from you, and remember your sin no more.” The second thing He does is this. He removes my sin from His sight, and does not hold it against me anymore. And that's because He held back His wrath.

The first thing He does is hold back His wrath, so that there might be the possibility that I can have a relationship with Him, that I could really trust Him. The second thing He tells me is this. I'm not going to hold your unrighteousness against you, because I'm going to remove your transgressions from you, and remember your sin no more. You see, if he did not do that, I really couldn't trust Him, because there would be no relationship.

And then king David, one of my favorite Hebrew individuals. King David, one of the greatest of Israel's statesmen, the greatest Israeli general, diplomat, poet, and also the greatest Israeli repentant. He tells us, in Psalm 103, that this is how God is able to hold back His wrath, and remove our transgressions from us. King David writes this. “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor His anger forever. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

Now what's the significance of that little phrase “so far as the east is from the west?” Let me tell you how I discovered the beauty of that truth.

Years ago, I was flying an aircraft from Maryland to California, a cross country flight. My flight plan required that I dial a course of 270, which is due west on my directional gyro for a certain amount of time, flying that course setting of 270 due west. I went up to altitude, and gauged the auto pilot, went to the directional gyro, and tuned the course of 270, which is due west.

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I enjoyed the wonderful flight. It was a nighttime flight. I began to ask myself the question. What would an airplane think, if an airplane could think? (*Laughter.*) Now here's what I think an airplane would think, if an airplane could think, I think. (*Laughter.*) The airplane would think this. He just dialed in a course of 270, which is due west. As long as he doesn't change that course setting, and I have enough fuel, I'm going to go 270 to California. As long as he doesn't change the course setting, and I have enough fuel, I'm going to go 270 to China. As long as he doesn't change the course setting, and I have enough fuel, I'm going to go 270 to England. As long as he doesn't change the course setting, and I have enough fuel, I'm going to go 270 back to Maryland.

You see, friends, in the eyes of that plane, you will fly west forever. Much later, I flew that same plane back to Maryland, and reversed the situation, dialing a course of 090 due east, for a certain amount of time. The airplane would think this. He just dialed in a course due east, 090. As long as he doesn't change the course setting, and I have enough fuel, I'm going to go 090, which is due east. If he doesn't change the course setting, and I have enough fuel, I'll go 090 due east to England. And then 090 to China. And then 090 back to California. You see, in the eyes of the plane, there is no end to east.

And I'm so grateful that the Scripture doesn't say, "As far as the north is from the south, have I removed your transgressions from you," because that does not happen when you go on a northerly course.

Here's what happens. Dial 360 into your directional gyro in your compass on your heading, you'll reach a spot on the magnetic North Pole.

Now this is what happens to your compass needle. All of a sudden, north stops, south begins. Some time later, you come over a place on the earth known as the magnetic South Pole. Here's what happens to your compass needle, (*hand motions*), because south stops, and north begins.

Now friends, I'm very, very grateful. Not only does God hold back His wrath from me because of my sinfulness and my unrighteousness, not only does He remove my transgressions as far as He can, and remembers them no more, but He offers me an east/west forgiveness that has no end.

If the Scripture said, "as far as the north is from the south, so far have I removed your transgressions from you," this is what it would mean. There would come a time in my life when God's forgiveness meter would go like this. (*hand motions.*) You just ran out, and you're on your own.

The Scripture doesn't say that. King David doesn't say that. He says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed" my transgressions from me, and doesn't hold them against me anymore.

Why does He do that? I asked myself years ago, "If God does hold back His wrath, if He does remove my transgressions from me, and remembers them no more, if He does offer me an east/west forgiveness, why does He do that?"

Perhaps an illustration might help us understand this. On my second tour in Viet Nam, I was often taken off the ship and assigned to be a forward air controller. My job was to coordinate Naval air strikes, and carry Naval based aircraft, Naval gunfire and Marine Corps artillery to support the Army infantry in the northern sections of I-Corps in Viet

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Nam. I was assigned to two army divisions as a Naval officer, as their forward air controller, the 101st Airborne Division, and the First Cavalry Division.

At one time in my life, I found myself as the only Naval officer among twenty thousand Army guys. But I thought that made the odds even. (*Laughter.*) I was involved in the recapturing of the city of Huey after the TET offensive in 1968, 1969 and '70.

That was one of the things that really disturbed me, because my job was purely destructive. I was just marking targets and blowing things up, and that got to me.

And one day, in my own devotional life, I said, “Lord, is there something I can do that is very positive in a very destructive environment?”

One day I was in my jeep, going in to cross the Perfume River, to brief the Army Republic in Viet Nam, in a mission where I was going to support them from the air. My New Testament fell out of my flight suit. A young man came by on a moped, a Vietnamese gentleman. He saw the Bible and picked it up, and came over to me very excitedly, and brushed it off and said, “Christian! Christian!”

Well, I'd been to Vietnamese language school, so I said, “Yes!” (*Laughter.*)

He said, “Christian!”

It turned out that this young man was Pastor Win, the pastor of the Tin Lan Church in the city of Huey. To make a long story short, he and I got involved, and we built an orphanage in the city of Huey after the TET offensive.

We found forty-one children in the streets of Huey that we brought into our orphanage that we built. It took us eleven months to bum and beg material. That's how we built that orphanage.

One day I got a call on my radio from my MP's in the city of Hue, who said that the city had been hit by some rocket attacks by the Viet Kong, and that a little boy at the orphanage had been wounded rather severely, and they wanted to know if I could come and take him into an Army hospital.

So I got in my jeep from my air base where I was stationed with the Army, drove the eight miles to the jungle, got into the city of Huey, took the little boy into my jeep, and took him down to the hospital. I think my friend Pastor Win thought I was a Naval officer, and I could get him to the hospital quicker than he could.

Immediately the surgeon began to repair the young boy's arm, and he came out of the surgery room, and said, “Bruce, we need to get some blood to save your little boy's life.”

I said, “Well, here, Doc. Why don't you take some of mine? I'll give you a pint or two, whatever you need.”

He said, “No. We need it from his own people, because of the immune system of the Vietnamese people. Can you find some blood from the Vietnamese?”

So here I was, confronted in the early morning hours, trying to find blood to save a little boy's life. So I went back with my friend Pastor Win to the orphanage. And here I was, in my well educated English way, trying to explain to these forty-one children that their little friend was going to die unless somebody would come up and give some blood.

After a few minutes of translation from Pastor Win, I found out that the little boy's name was Hai. He came up and grabbed my hand and squeezed it, and he looked up to

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me with those little black eyes, and he just looked up at me and smiled. I took that to mean that he understood what I was saying.

You need to understand something about Hai. We found him living in a garbage dump. He was about nine years old. He had no living relatives. His parents were executed by the Viet Kong. We took him into the orphanage. He was the rottenest human being I had ever met. He would just a soon slit your throat as look at you.

Well, one day I was teaching Hai how to read English, and I used the Bible as my textbook. We read the Old Testament one week, and then we would read the New Testament the next week.

We came to John 14, where Jesus says, “I will not leave you as an orphan; I will make My abode with you.” I was explaining to little Hai what that meant.

And he looked up to me, and he said, “Does that mean I can have a father?”

I said, “Yes, Hai, that’s what it means. You can have a heavenly Father.”

In God’s grace, He was pleased to grant that little boy saving faith. That little boy’s life was transformed by God’s grace. He was the one who said, “I’ll go with you to the hospital.”

We took him to the hospital, and put him into the surgical tent. The doctors were immediately drawing his blood, processing it, putting it into the little boy, whose name was Dao. He was dying.

And after a few minutes, Hai began to cry. And a surgeon said, “Bruce, could you find out what’s wrong with your little friend?”

I knew that language would be a problem. So I asked Pastor Win to go over and find out what was wrong with little Hai.

Pastor Win came back and relayed the following conversation that I’m going to share with you. I didn’t understand the full significance of it until months later, when I was shot down and wounded, and spent time in a Naval hospital, and in various medical institutions, being put back together, and treating my own injuries. I began to think about this conversation. It went like this.

Pastor Win went over to Hai, and said, “Hai, are you in pain? Is the needle bothering you?”

He looked up and said, “No.”

He said, “Are you sick in your stomach? Are you feeling faint? Are you going to pass out?”

Hai said, “No.”

Now in desperation, Pastor Win, my friend, said this. “Hai, tell me, why are you crying?”

This little boy looked up into the eyes of the man who was now his earthly father, and said this. “How long is it going to take me to die?”

You see, he didn’t know that I, a well educated Naval officer, needed only a pint or two of his blood. He thought I meant all of it.

I asked myself the question. Why did he go, if that’s what he thought? If he really thought that he was going to give all of his blood, to go through that tube, and from his body into the other little boy’s body, why did he go with me, if that’s what he thought?

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You know, friends, the only reason I could come up with is that he loved his little friend enough that he was willing to give his blood for him. He loved him enough.

Now I don't know that I knew how to love at that point in my life like that. I think I was very, very fortunate, as a young man, to see a perfect example of what happened to Jesus Christ when He was taken to the cross, and said, “Will you give Your blood, so that God will hold back His wrath?” He will remove your sins from you, remember your sins no more, and offer you an east/west forgiveness. “Will You do that for him?”

I came to this conclusion, that when Jesus Christ was on the cross, I was on His mind, because He loved me. Friends, that is life changing, when you understand that.

Can God be trusted? Absolutely! He holds back His wrath from me. He removes my transgressions from me and remembers them no more. He offers me an east/west forgiveness, because He loved me enough to die for me and give His blood for me, so that in 2015, at the prayer breakfast in Pittsburgh, I can stand before you with a guilt free, challenging and rewarding life.

Can God be trusted? Absolutely! He has done everything possible to have a relationship with me. And I trust Him. I trust Him.

May God give us the grace today to trust Him, not only for His glory, but also for our well-being, and for the benefit of our great city. Thank you very much. (*Standing ovation.*)