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Heavenly Father, we thank You for sending Your Son among us. We thank You for the price that He purchased so that we could one day join You in Your Kingdom, but we also thank You that Your Kingdom is now here with us. Thank You for the love and the sacrifice that You have put in our hearts to emulate, for all these wonderful people who pour into the lives of their young people. And I pray a special prayer for the camps that are going to be starting this week. I pray, God, that as those kids go up there, they just have a very real encounter with You, God. I pray that their eyes are open to new truths and to new possibilities of who they are in Christ and what they can become. And now I ask that You will please direct and guide my words. Help my brothers and sisters here to know what it is You're saying to us today. In Jesus' name, Amen. I looked up the dates when Steve Pettigo was going to Africa. It's the last week of December. That doesn't mean we can wait until December. He's got to buy his plane tickets now. But he's not asking for very much. I think if everybody chipped in ten bucks, we're going to be good. Let's start by reading the verse that is our core verse for this. It's 1 John 1, verses 1-4. It's in your bulletin if you want to read along. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life, the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us, that which we have seen and heard, we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, and these things we write to you, that your joy may be full." I felt led to speak to you today about the subject of making Jesus real. In many areas of this society of ours, it is discouraged or even forbidden to make Jesus real. Now I know we have freedom of speech, and that means there's no laws against talking about Jesus, but often in our various social circles, it is frowned upon to speak too often about Jesus or to believe too completely in His promises or to deny the possibility that other faiths are just as valid. If someone mentions the Church, the conversation quickly devolves into gossip surrounding the latest scandal involving some perverse minister, and so-called intellectuals take great delight in mocking and shunning you if you disclose even a glimmer of curiosity about the divine. So against all of this societal persecution, I felt it was important to spend the day talking about making Jesus real. Making Jesus real is important in three areas of the Christian life. We first become saved when Jesus makes Himself real to us. We then grow in our faith and our maturity as we make Jesus real to ourselves. And finally, we bring others to the faith when we make Jesus real to them. So to begin with, Jesus must make Himself real to us. What makes Christianity different from other religions? It's different because it is not the means of man attaining God, but the means of God attaining man. It is not the rules we must follow to earn our way to Him, but the price that He paid to bring us to Himself. Christianity does not promise salvation to those who earn it. And yet we see in every corner of this world, there is a burden on men's hearts to atone and to pay for the wrong things that they've done. Everyone universally has this desire to make right what they've done wrong. In light of this universally felt need for us to earn forgiveness, to make amends for our errors, how on earth has a religion based on letting someone else take care of that forest ever managed to gain any traction? Simply because God is real, and He has spoken into the heart of every believer, and He has whispered, "Yes, this is Me, this is Truth. Follow this path." There are sadly some who call themselves Christians, but who day after day try to be good enough to earn the forgiveness of God. This is foolishness, and I fear for those people's souls. You are saved by faith, and while I don't deny that faith without works is dead, also works without faith is just as dead. Jesus reveals to us that we were dead in our sins, and as dead men we could not bring ourselves back to life. We needed Him to bring us back to life. He lived the life we were incapable of living, and died the death we deserved to die. And when we believe this, and trust in Him, and choose to obey Him as Lord and Savior, starting that very moment we are saved. If anyone here today has spent even a moment of your Christian life worried that you might just not be good enough, that you might just not make it into heaven if you died today, then I need to tell you the good news. You cannot be good enough. So trust in Jesus. He will be good enough for you. Don't give up trying to be a good person. That's absolutely what Jesus wants. But He doesn't expect you to be good enough. That's why He died on the cross for you, because you're not good enough, so rejoice. But unfortunately, this wonderful truth is not something that everyone can immediately believe when they hear it. If I told you that we keep the Loch Ness Monster in our secret basement here at church, you would roll your eyes and say, "Yeah, whatever." There are just some things we were incapable of believing or accepting, and the story of Jesus is on that list. But wonderfully, Jesus reveals this truth to us. Our logical minds hear the story of Jesus and start to say, "Yeah, whatever." But then Jesus whispers inside of us, "Absolutely." To put it another way, He gives us faith. He gives us the ability and the power to believe in Him. He makes Himself real to each one of us, and so begins our Christian life. If you're here today and you're not sure, if it sounds plausible but maybe you're not quite there yet, then I encourage you to rely on the promise found in Matthew 7 and 8. Matthew 7, verses 7 and 8. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." So Jeremiah 29, 13. "And you will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart." If God is real, then seek Him and He promises to reveal Himself to you. Read the Bible and pray, not skeptically, not with some vain attempt to prove it all false, but with your whole heart. Seek God and watch what happens. The God of the Bible is a God who keeps His promises so rely on His promises. You will find Him when you seek for Him with all your heart. So now we're Christians. What happens next? Well, I've spoken before that becoming a Christian is like switching your nationality while still living in your old country. You're still surrounded by the same people as before. You speak the same language as before. You have the same habits as before. And it's often easy to forget that these are no longer your people and this is no longer your culture. So in order to grow, in order to cast off the ways of your old culture, you need to make Jesus real to yourself. You need to train your mind to look at the world as a citizen of heaven, which is what the Bible says you are, and not a citizen of this world. There are several things you can do to make Jesus real to yourself. To begin with, you need to saturate your mind with the Word of God. Hebrews 4.12 says, "For the Word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." Romans 12.2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." We renew our minds by filling it with the living, powerful Word of God. Now, your Bible is not magical, it's ink on paper, but the truths recorded there are the Word of God. And as that truth flows into your brain, as the Holy Spirit takes that truth and begins to mold it and make repairs with it, you will be transformed. You will find yourself in a situation, and suddenly some verse you read previously will pop into your head, and it will apply to the situation, and suddenly it will all make sense. And it will help you see and navigate what you're going through. And then in addition to consciously helping you make better choices, you will also subconsciously be transformed. As the Word of God gets in your brain, you will find your anger subsiding. You will find forgiveness coming out of your heart more easily. Reading the Word of God is like exercise. One day of exercise is not going to make a noticeable difference. But exercise every day, even just a little, and you will start to notice changes. It's the same for the Word of God. Get it into your head day by day, and as you submit to that transforming Word of God, you will see yourself change, and Jesus will become more real to you. Another way to make Jesus real to yourself is to engage in prayer. Not just pray, but engage in it. James 5, 16b says, "The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." And James 1, 6 through 8 says, "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting. For he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. But not that man suppose he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." When you start taking your prayers seriously, and you start seeing your prayers answered, Jesus will become more real to you. But in order for this to happen, we must make some changes. Your starters, stop worrying so much about blessing yourself in your prayers, and start worrying about the Kingdom of God. Pray for missionaries. Pray for the unsaved. Pray for this church to be fruitful and multiply. I don't mean never pray for yourself, but if that's all you ever do, you may have bad priorities. Start loving what God loves, hating what God hates, and desiring what God desires, and then pray for that stuff. In 1 Thessalonians 5, 16 through 18 says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Prayer doesn't have to just be asking for stuff. Offer prayers of rejoicing. Offer prayers of thanksgiving. One of my personal favorites, just offer up prayers of talking to God. This will make it easier to obey the middle part of that verse, "pray without ceasing." God is with us every moment of the day. He is our loving Heavenly Father. He delights in spending time with us, and it should delight us to spend time with Him. And some of us may have had bad experiences with our parents. We may have had parents that couldn't wait to get you out of the room and flip on the TV and just didn't want to be around you. And you've got to learn that your Heavenly Father is not like your earthly father. Your earthly father looks forward to nothing more than spending time with you. The more time you spend talking to God during every idle moment, the more real He will become to you. And you will develop a constant consciousness of His presence. Also it's good to start a prayer journal. Write down the things you're praying for. This will help you remember what you're trying to pray for. It will also cause you to follow up on those prayer requests. And then when they get answered, record how they got answered. It doesn't mean every prayer will get answered the way you want. It doesn't mean every prayer will get answered in the time frame that you want. But as time goes on, your journal will begin growing and this list of answered prayers and it will strengthen your faith. It works for me. I write down answers to prayer that I wasn't even praying for. When God answered the prayer of that Jordanian woman who prayed for my brother just three hours before he got in that car accident, I wrote that down as an answered prayer. And when I go back through my prayer journal, I praise and thank God for an answered prayer even though it wasn't mine. As your prayer life becomes more active and more rich and as you pay attention to how these prayers are answered, and as you improve your memory of those answers by recording them in your journal, Jesus will become more real to you. So Jesus made himself real to us when we became Christians and then we grow in our faith by making him real to us. And now, after we've learned all that, we will be most ready to make him real to others. I've never heard of a person who just woke up one day and said, "I think I'm a Christian." With no contact with the Bible, with no contact with other Christians, just sat up in a bed in some third world country and suddenly said, "I'm a Christian." I've never heard of that. I'm not saying it's impossible. But what the way God chooses to work in this world, the way he chooses to use us, is explained in Romans 10, 13 through 15. "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things." Also 2 Corinthians 5, 20, "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were pleading through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God." Why did God save us? Because he loves us. Why did he love us? Here's the catch, folks. We didn't earn it or deserve it. "You were a gross, repugnant, wicked trader to God when he saved you." But he said, "I'm going to love you anyways." We must get this into our heads because far too often it's easy for us to look at someone and say, "Well, they're gross. They're wicked. They're a terrible person. They don't deserve God." But they are us. We are just as wicked and undeserving as everyone else. And once we get that, once we realize that we didn't earn this forgiveness and this love and this salvation, once you realize how undeserving and what a great gift it was, then we'll see why all the other people are just as undeserving and how we can share with them the wonderful thing that's shared with us. If you can pick and choose who gets saved and who doesn't, the love of the Father is not in you. And I worry for your soul. You must understand your complete and total guilt before God. If hearing that makes you uncomfortable, it should be a red flag that your heart is not right. I know that I'm a wicked, terrible sinner and I rejoice. And I've been forgiven and I try to live a life of righteousness now, but I know that I was not able to save myself. No one deserves God, but everyone needs God. You did not earn God. You did not even deserve to have someone tell you about Jesus. But someone did it out of the goodness and love that Jesus showed them. And now we must take the goodness and love that Jesus showed us and pass it on to others. We must make Jesus real to this dying world. Yes, it's true they won't be able to believe until Jesus reveals himself to their hearts, but he cannot do that until we do this. We must proclaim the love of God through our actions and our words. We must spend our time, our talents, our money, our resources, and our natural gifts to get as many people into the Jesus lifeboat before it's too late. And it will be too late when they die and it will be too late when Jesus makes his second coming. It needs to happen now. It starts with love. People look at us and they see a heart and life transformed. They see a person who no longer lives for their own self-interest, but who lives for the glory of God. They see people who say no to sinful pleasures. They see people who sacrifice everything, even their own lives, for something greater than themselves. And then these people inquire, "What is it? Why do you do it?" And we say, "Jesus." Some will believe, others will scoff. But we press on. We make the most of every opportunity. We lay down our lives and take up his cause. And as we persist and press on and as our whole lives end up glorifying him, the scoffing stops and people stand amazed. What they thought was just a phase has turned into a lifetime of devotion. And they are faced with an undeniable truth, something has changed you. And that truth will change them. What this world needs is a real encounter with Jesus. There is so much fake in the world. Materialism, greed, chemical abuse, sexual immorality, intellectualism. All of these things promise to satisfy our deepest down craving for Jesus and none of them can. We see a world flitting from one high to the next. One rush to the next, always searching for fulfillment and always being left disappointed. But Christ does not disappoint. But do you know that? I mean, do you really believe that Christ does not disappoint? If not, you need Christ to be made real to you. And once he has, you will find your greatest joy and purpose in life making him real to others. It's a wonderful life because Jesus is life. Let's pray. Our wonderful, loving, amazing Heavenly Father. We thank you so much for this act of love that you have shown to the world. Jesus, we thank you for your obedience. We thank you that you laid down your life to purchase us wicked, awful sinners and bring us into your kingdom. Please continue, God, to open our eyes, make yourself real to us. Help us to develop good habits. As we read the word, I pray, God, that every person in here that as they read the word, that it comes to life, that it speaks to their heart, that they see and understand new truths and new things that they didn't see before. I pray, God, that you will remind us of the things we are praying for and point out to us how you are answering those prayers. And as we look out into the world, help us to see ourselves in our hurting, wicked, dying brothers and sisters out there and help our hearts to have mercy and break for them. Cause us to lay down our lives for them. Praying Jesus' name, Amen.