

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
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Michael Chitwood  
Who Jesus Loves**

It is such a great privilege to be here with you all today. I'm Michael Chitwood with World Vision, and your reputation as a church proceeds you. In fact, I have heard about the family here at CPC for years, since I started at World Vision, because of your heart and compassion for children and communities around the world and all that you have done to show Jesus' love for our brothers and sisters. I know many of you took the Matthew 25 challenge this past week—about 500 folks from this church. What an amazing step for you to take into the uncomfortable—outside of your comfort zone to take a small sacrificial challenge every day, both to connect with Jesus' words in Matthew 25, but also to understand what some of our brothers and sisters around the world face on a daily basis. It's tough to know what the walk to get water is like if you just have to walk to your sink. It's tough to know what it would be like to have your family ripped from your home in the middle of the night, knowing that you are never going home again and you are going to be a refugee because of war and violence...and you will have to try to find a safe place for your family. I just applaud those of you who took that challenge seriously this week and I hope it changed you in some way.

Last week pastor John shared about Jesus' first words in His ministry and the words that He shared in His final hours here on earth. In a little bit I want to go back to those words because the words that Jesus chose to share in His final hours I believe are some of the most profound teaching in His entire ministry here on earth. They have shaped my faith in some incredible ways, and I want to share that with you. But to do that, I want to start by sharing my story with you. I grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan. If you are familiar with Grand Rapids, it's like living in a bubble. It's about as safe a place as you could possibly grow up. I grew up with two parents that loved me and two older brothers that were my heroes, Dan and Dave. I went to one of the best schools in the state of Michigan, had an incredible church family, was involved in Young Life in high school, and had a great group of friends. To be honest, life was pretty easy for me growing up. Where I come from, you could start playing full contact football in second grade, and so I started playing football in second grade and I played all the way through college, where I played defensive line at a small Christian college called Olivet Nazarene University. When I finished college football I swore off two things: morning workouts and running. I hated running. As a defensive lineman, if I had to run more than ten yards it meant I missed a tackle or I was in trouble. My hate for running is kind of ironic, and you will hear why in just a few minutes. Well, right out of school I became a fifth-grade teacher in Kankakee, Illinois in a school very different than the one I grew up in. In this school, about 98% of the children came from low income families. It was my first experience with poverty up close. It was after my second year of teaching that I went on my first international trip.

My dad invited me to go to Haiti with him to train teachers there. I'll never forget the first two words I learned in Haitian Creole: "mwèn grangou" ... I'm hungry. Young kids would run alongside our vehicles and sometimes hold on to them, saying those words over and over again. I'm hungry. I'm hungry. Now, I had seen poverty firsthand as a teacher. In fact, the first homeless person I ever met in my entire life was a ten-year-old girl in the fifth-grade class I taught. But I had never seen anything like this—kids with absolutely no food to eat, no safe water to drink, and often no place to lay their head. So, I did what most people would do. I came back from Haiti with an application to be a teacher there. I thought, that's how I could help these kids. I'll move to Haiti and be a teacher. But I was getting married the next summer and as I started to share this vision with my friends and family, everyone told me that moving to Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, was a terrible idea. And so, despite feeling a deep sense in my spirit that I was supposed to do something to help those kids, I froze. I chickened out and I let fear get the best of me. I didn't move to Haiti. Instead, I took a great job with a ministry called "Youth for Christ" doing high school ministry in Champagne, Illinois. Now, my time at Youth for Christ was incredible. I loved the ministry at Youth for Christ that I got to have with kids, but I knew deep in my spirit that I had ignored a whisper from the Holy Spirit to do something to help those kids.

Well, it was during my first year of ministry and my first year of marriage that I had my bubble burst and had my first real personal experience with pain. My dad went in for what was supposed to be a routine shoulder surgery to have his rotator cuff repaired. It should be in one day and out the next, but something happened in post-op and he slipped into a coma. So, I made the drive from Champagne, Illinois back to Grand Rapids and me and my brothers Dan and Dave and my mom held hands around his bedside for the next three days, praying for a miracle, because you see, we serve a God of miracles. We serve a God who can heal the sick and raise the dead, and I knew absolutely for certain He would heal my dad and my dad would sit up in that bed. And when that didn't happen, and my dad passed away in that hospital bed on Mother's Day 2001, it shattered my faith. It wrecked me. Here I was, in my first year of marriage, my first year of doing youth ministry, and I was struggling to even talk to God at all. Well, it was two years after losing my dad, almost to the day, that I got a phone call from a high school buddy of mine, Mark Smith. He was calling to tell me that he was going to run the Chicago marathon, and he wanted to know if I wanted to come watch him run. Notice he did not ask me to run the marathon with him. I had taken that commitment to no more morning workouts and no running extremely seriously, but I kept eating like a defensive lineman—by this time I was about 265 pounds and I couldn't run around the block. I still hated running with a passion, but I heard a whisper from the Holy Spirit and it was just two words: "Do this." *What do you mean do this? I hate running. I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to run a marathon. That's crazy God.* Quiet whisper: "Do this."

Now, I'm not someone who is always as responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as I would like to be, but that day it was crystal clear. That small, quiet whisper. It was quiet, but it was clear. So, despite the fact that I had never even run a 5K, I signed up for the Chicago Marathon and I began training slowly for that race. I was so slow; my friends would see me out around town in Champagne, Illinois and they'd say, "Hey

Chitwood, I thought you were training to run a marathon.” And I would say, “I am training to run a marathon...thanks for asking.” And they would say, “Oh, I keep seeing you walking all over town all the time.” Well, something amazing happened out on those long runs—I started talking to God again. Sometimes, to be honest, I was yelling at Him. I was pretty angry and hurt and I felt He had it coming and He could probably take it. Sometimes I’d pull over on the side of the road and I’d just start crying. My heart was broken and my faith had been shattered. Sometimes I was just listening to Him, and on October 15, 2003 I took the starting line of my first race ever, the Chicago Marathon, and it was electric. There were 35,000 people there who had trained to run this thing. There were a million spectators. It felt like I was playing in the Super Bowl. Now there was one small problem...Mark and I had not discussed how fast we were going to run the race, but we were planning to run it together. Mark had trained to run nine minutes a mile, I had trained to just to finish before they shut the thing down, so we decided to split the difference which should have been about 10.5 minutes a mile. The start of the race went amazing. In fact, about mile three I passed a guy running on a prosthetic leg, and I yelled *come on buddy, you got this! You can do it!* So we keep running and around mile ten the wheels come off and I am done. I have to walk the entire back half of this race. About mile twenty or twenty-two I hear someone yell *come on buddy, you can do it!* You know who it was...the guy with the prosthetic leg flew by me. I wish I could tell you I crushed that race, but the truth is the race crushed me. It was terrible. It was the hardest thing I’d ever done in my life, but it absolutely transformed me physically, spiritually, and emotionally. I decided that day I would do a race like this every year for the rest of my life, so when I heard about the Ironman Triathlon, I knew I had to sign up. If you don’t know what it is, the Ironman is a 2.4 mile swim in a lake or an ocean, then you get on a bike and ride 112 miles, and then if you can still stand up, you tie up your shoes and you run a marathon. When I signed up I didn’t own a bike and I didn’t know how to swim, but you know what? I had seen what fear can do to you. Fear kept me from moving to Haiti despite that whisper. Fear almost made me quit training for my first marathon. I’ve come to believe that almost every amazing thing that God has for us in this life is on the other side of fear and you have to step through fear to get to it. Well I’m glad I did because one day, on a five hour bike ride through the headwinds and the corn fields of Champagne, Illinois, I had what I can only describe as a vision from God. The conversation went something like this: *Michael, you could do these races and help those kids—kids like the ones you met in Haiti.* My mind started racing and I remembered seeing all these charities at marathons, raising money for cancer research and health disorders and all these things, but I could not remember a single charity raising money to help children in the poorest communities on the planet, and I knew...this is what God is calling me to do. And through the grace of God I found myself meeting with some leaders from World Vision, and twelve years ago they gave me a shot to become the first Team World Vision staff person. We launched a ministry called Team World Vision as a way to invite people—people like me, people who hated running, people who were like *never in my life would I do a marathon*—to step through fear and take on that challenge, not just to lose weight, but to help kids on the other side of the world. That first year we only had 100 people sign up, but since 2006 we’ve helped 40,000 people cross finish lines and raised over 40 million dollars for clean water projects in Africa. You know, God has given me a front row seat to see some amazing

things. I've seen folks lives absolutely transformed as they step through fear to take on these challenges, and I've traveled to Africa fifteen times to see our brothers' and sisters' lives completely changed. But I've had some more heartbreaks along the way. When my dad died, one of the toughest realizations I had was: I am only twenty-five years old; this is the first time I've experienced pain in my life. I realized there is more to come. The longer I live, the more pain and heartache will be in store for me.

Well, it didn't take long for more to come. In 2009 I lost my brother David to alcoholism, obesity, and depression. He was 37 at the time. He had four young kids he left without their dad, and his young wife widowed. And then, just as I was catching my breath and getting up on my feet, in December 2013, just before Christmas, I lost my brother Dan. No real explanation on what happened—he went upstairs to his bedroom to get ready for his daughter's eighth-grade basketball game and he never came down. He also had four young kids he left without a dad and his young wife without her husband. As if losing my dad wasn't enough, losing two of her three kids absolutely broke my mom's heart and it literally rushed my spirit. As kids, Dan and David—they are five and seven older than me—they were my heroes, but as adults they became my two best friends.

My brother David was a house painter who struggled to keep work year-round. His work and employment usually fluctuated with his alcoholism and depression. He gained weight and lost weight multiple times, but when he passed he was about 450 pounds and the call wrecked me, but it didn't surprise me. See, I knew David was in bad shape and he and I talked often about what it would look like for him to get healthy, for him to kick the alcoholism, and he had finally decided to take the scary commitment and go into an inpatient rehab. But the challenge was, our family didn't have much money, so he had to sign up for a public rehab facility and there was a six-month waiting list. David passed away waiting to get into that rehab program. David battled a lot of personal issues, but I've never met someone who loved hurting people the way he did. His heart reflected Jesus' heart in so many ways. He might only have twenty dollars to his name, but he would spend his last dollar buying someone else a meal.

My brother Dan was a pastor and we actually did youth ministry together at Youth for Christ for several years before he left YFC to become a pastor in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. We were so much alike—if we were in a room together, folks couldn't even get a word in edgewise we talked so much. We laughed, we joked, we dreamed together, we did an Ironman together, and we even went to Kenya together to visit our World Vision sponsored kids. When Dan died in 2013, it rocked our family. It messed with me in a way that neither the loss of my dad or my brother David did. You see, my dad we could chalk up to a freak incident in the hospital, and my brother David had all these health issues, but when Dan died, it really left me with a crippling fear of dying young and leaving my family without me. When Dan died, his kids were 8, 10, 12 and 17. You know, losing my dad at 25 was pretty hard, but I know from my nieces and nephews losing their dads at such young ages was so much harder. Kids that age aren't prepared to deal with that type of loss.

This is my family, my wife Dani and my son Cruz [shows picture]. In 2014, just six months after we lost Dan, my wife gave birth to our son Cruz. Cruz calls me “papa” which is kind of funny because I didn’t realize that a lot of kids call their grandpa papa and I’m an older dad and my grey hair is coming in, so when he calls me papa some folks think *is that grandpa? Who is this?* This kid came at a pretty dark time in our lives, and for those of you that have kids, he has shown me a whole kind of love I never knew existed. It’s given me a glimpse of God’s love for us. In fact, I would do everything in my power to help this kid have every opportunity to become whatever God has for him to be.

The year after my brother David died, I was having lunch with my friend Tommy and I was trying to talk Tommy into running an ultra-marathon with me in South Africa. It’s a fifty-six-mile race called the Comrades, and I said, “If we go do this race we can get a thousand kids sponsored through World Vision.” Tommy’s response rocked me. What he shared was hard to hear and messed with everything I’d been dedicating my life to. He said, “Michael, I just don’t get it. Your brother just passed away, your nieces and nephews desperately need you, and you are spending all your time and energy helping kids on the other side of the world. Those kids aren’t your family. They are not your kids; they are other people’s kids. I just don’t get it.” Well, Tommy’s words caught me pretty hard. I was already wrought with grief and with guilt. I helped thousands of people lose weight and run marathons, how could I not help my brother do it? I have a master’s degree in Social Work, how could I not help him with his addictions? And now one of my best friends is telling me I am neglecting my nieces and nephews. It was hard to not at least consider the fact that maybe Tommy was right.

Now let me tell you about my sister—I didn’t tell you I had a sister. I didn’t even know I had a sister until 2010. That’s my sister Josphine [picture shown]. She lives in Kenya and I met Josphine just a few months after that conversation with Tommy. You see, I went and I ran in that ultra-marathon with some other friends—Tommy didn’t go. But after that race I went to Kenya and I got to meet Josphine and my World Vision sponsored child, Maureen. Maureen was just three years old the first time I met her. Their community had no access to safe water. In fact, Maureen had to walk down a mountain, two or three miles, to get water that wasn’t even safe to drink. The child mortality rate in their community was 50%. A lot of us don’t even know what that means. That means half the kids in their village would die before their fifth birthday, largely due to unsafe water. The school she went to was the worst I’d ever seen in all my trips to Africa, no access to health care...in fact, Josphine always had to worry if there even would be food for the kids to eat. But I’ve seen some amazing things...I’ve gone back to their village multiple times now. And while Josphine has been praying for a better life for her kids, back home thousands of people have been stepping through fear and taking on the challenge of running a marathon so that her kids can have a better shot at life, and thousands of kids have been stepping up and sponsoring kids to help bring hope to this community. And everything has changed—they now have access to safe water. In fact, there is a water tap right outside their home; they don’t have to walk anywhere to get water anymore. Maureen is in an awesome school, and her mom tells me all the

time that we were the answer to her prayers. But the truth is, she was the answer to mine.

Now, I'd like to take a look at those powerful words, the words that Jesus shared during His last hours on earth. I'm going to read them from Matthew 25, starting at verse 31:

<sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.<sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

<sup>34</sup> "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

<sup>37</sup> "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

<sup>40</sup> "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

<sup>41</sup> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

<sup>44</sup> "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

<sup>45</sup> "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

<sup>46</sup> "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."  
[Matthew 25:31-46]

Some pretty heavy words from Jesus in His last days here on earth. There's obviously a lot there, but it's pretty clear right? I mean, if we wanted to just give the Cliff Notes version: if you see someone in need, you should do everything in your power to help them. And we could stop there and get the gist of Jesus' words, but I think there is a

more powerful challenge in there if we dig a little further. Jesus says, “Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done for me.” You see, it’s pretty easy to take that Bible verse and truncate it or cut it in half. We do that all the time. I grew up in the church and we talked about the least of these all the time—we have to care for the least of these, help the least of these. That’s true, but Jesus continues that sentence—the least of these brothers and sisters of mine—and I think there’s something really special in what He is doing there. He’s saying *those of you, those who the world views as the least of these, the outcast, the worthless, the untouchables, I consider My family, and when you help them, it’s literally like you are helping Me.*

In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenges us to rethink who our neighbor is, right? It’s not just the person next to you or your friends. And in Matthew 25 He pushes us even further to rethink who we consider our family, because as long as I can keep someone a stranger, I can keep my own needs, the needs of my family, my community, my country, my people above the needs of their family, their community, their country, and their people. I can keep them other. But as soon as I begin to truly believe in my heart of hearts that Josphine is my sister, her needs matter more to me...her worries, her fears matter more to me, her kids matter more to me, and I am not just compelled to care more, I’m compelled to do more. In fact, I should be compelled to do everything in my power to make sure her kids have the same shot at life that my kid has. Now, just to be clear, it is by grace through faith that we are saved, but in response to that marvelous gift of salvation, Jesus gives us an invitation to express the same type of love He has shown us to our brothers and sisters. But it’s kind of wild here, He takes it a step further. He even says that how we treat the thirsty, the hungry, the stranger—that’s how we are treating Him. You see, we often hear that we are the hands and feet of Christ, and there is truth in that. God uses us to show His love to a hurting world. But in this verse, we don’t get to be Jesus; He’s telling us we get to serve Jesus. Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine...He doesn’t say *it’s as if you were Me doing it*, He says *it’s as if you did it for Me.*

Can you imagine, just for a second, that Jesus was hungry and you had a chance to meet that need? Or that Jesus didn’t have access to safe water and He was walking miles a day to get water that made Him sick? Can you imagine Jesus as a refugee, which by most accounts He was, and refusing Him a place to lay his head? I know this—if my son Cruz were in trouble, if he was facing any of those things, I would turn over heaven and earth to help him. I would do everything in my power to help him. Let me tell you a real honest confession. I am not sure I can ever love my sponsored child Maureen the same way I love that kid. That’s a very tall order. My love for this kid is unmatched, it’s unparalleled. I’m not sure I can ever love this little girl over in Kenya that same way. I do believe God is challenging me to and asking me to try. Where I’m at right now is I am learning to love Josphine as my sister, the same way I loved my

brothers, and I'm learning to love her kids the way I love my brother's kids. And I'm trying to turn over heaven and earth to make sure that they have a shot at life.

I want to invite you all to take a couple more steps today towards showing Jesus' love to our brothers and sisters. One of them is pretty easy and a lot of you already do it. I'd like to invite you to consider sponsoring a child today or sponsoring another child. You know, if you would have told me ten years ago that sponsoring Maureen could change her life and her community, I'm not sure I would have believed you, but I have to tell you, it absolutely has. And it's also changed me. Do you know that some of the first words that my son Cruz learned was Maureen's name because he prays for her every night? And the amazing thing is, I know they are praying for us too. We get to write letters back and forth and get updates. Now I know that it is pretty wild that I have been able to meet Maureen and that most of you, if you sponsor a kid, will never meet that child, at least on this side of heaven. At my dad's funeral they played this song by Ray Boltz and it's called "Thank You." The lyrics go "Thank you for giving to the Lord. I am a life that was changed." I imagine sometimes that all of the folks who sponsor kids someday are going to get to meet those kids when we get to heaven, and I pray that for everyone here that does sponsor a child. And even though you may not meet your kid, it doesn't mean your impact in their life is any less real, so when you leave today, whether you already sponsor a child or this would be your first time doing it, I'd love to ask you, do you have room in your family for one more? This is Triinity, she's nine and she lives in Zambia [shows photo] and there are a couple hundred kids out there just like Trinity. You could step up in the life of a child and make a huge difference today.

The other invitation I have for you is a lot scarier probably, and some of you are probably already squirming in your seats because the second I mentioned running a marathon, you knew this might be coming and maybe God started whispering to you. I know it sounds crazy to you, but I want to invite you to consider joining me in running the Twin Cities Marathon this fall in October. Now, I know what's happening because I've done this enough times. Some of you have a voice screaming at you right now: *Are you crazy? You cannot run a marathon! You are too old, too out of shape, too this, too that—whatever the excuse—You can't do that.* But then, there is a quiet voice and it's just a little whisper, and maybe it's saying those two words that I heard: *Do this.* And it may sound crazy but let me tell you this, 75% of the folks who run with Team World Vision have never run in their life. Most of them hate running. We are open to runners—if you are already a runner, we want you on the team; we need leaders. But you may be that person who is scared out of your mind. But remember what I said, almost every amazing thing God has for us in this life is on the other side of fear, and we have to step through fear to get to it. We have already had some amazing folks step up on the team for CPC to run the Twin Cities Marathon, and after the service we are going to have a short meeting. Coming to that meeting does not commit you automatically, it's just a place for you to learn more. But here's what I know: if you are feeling that tug, the easy

thing to do is to just ignore it and walk out. I want to challenge you not to do that. I know for some of you the toughest thing of doing something like this is just turning to your spouse or your friend and saying *I think I'm supposed to go to that meeting*, because I know, it feels like they might laugh at you. I thought my wife was going to laugh at me when I told her that at 265 pounds I was going to run a marathon. So, after the service I want to invite you to consider sponsoring a child and/or joining our team and running a marathon.

I want to thank you all for letting me share my story with you today, and as I pitch to this video in closing, I want you to consider this. Right now it is late afternoon in Africa. There is a little girl just like Maureen who is just returning from a long day looking for water. She maybe missed church this morning, she might not get to go to school tomorrow, and she may have to worry that the water she is carrying isn't even safe to drink. Today you have a chance to do something that could change her entire world and change yours in the process. Take a look at this video.

[Link to video]

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/b4hc1ie3w9e6rtw/TWV%20Say%20Yes%20Shorter%20Version.mp4?dl=0>

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon.  
Soli Deo Gloria.*