

**Pastor Kyle Mercer**  
Cities of Refuge

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Series: Taking Ground  
Joshua 20

Two Cities Church, have I told you lately how much I love you? I am so grateful for you in this church, and I especially felt it on Monday night at our prayer and worship night. I don't know if you were able to be there, but I want to show you some pictures from our night of prayer and worship. It was incredible. We had over 450 people in here, worshiping and praying together. We had 70 kids in the building next door. It was such an incredible time.

In fact, we were in the middle of worship, one or two of the songs, and I was just so excited. Pastor Dave couldn't be here, so I texted Pastor Dave and said, "Aslan is on the move." Remember Aslan from Narnia? Okay. I said, "Aslan is on the move." I looked back down after we sang a song. It auto corrected. It said, "Asians are on the move." He was like, "What's going on at our prayer night?"

I met somebody outside afterward, and she said, "Pastor Kyle, I almost snuck out during the last song because I needed to come out and see if the building was on fire," because it was so passionate. My favorite story is actually this young lady... She came out after the service. I'd never seen her before. She came up. She introduced herself. She said, "I live in the apartments right behind here."

She said, "Every Saturday night I drive by, and this place is packed, and every Sunday morning I drive by, and this place is packed, and every Sunday night I drive by, and this place is packed." She said, "So when I drove by Monday night, I said, 'That's it. I'm coming in.'" I said, "What an introduction to our prayer and worship night." She said it was just what she needed.

Guys, we are trying to create a culture of prayer and worship, an environment and an atmosphere of prayer. We're trying to say here that everything we do, which is really making and mobilizing disciples, we want it to be done in an environment of prayer

and worship. We want that to be what happens in your home, in your Community Group, people who pray with each other and pray for each other.

I keep saying this, but we are, as a church, in a season of transition and anticipation and expectation. This is really the year of leaping for us. We're heading into this new building. We're still hoping to be there by Christmas Eve services. What I want to tell you about really quickly is our Weekender. If for some reason, you've been coming around, and you've still not come to our Weekender...

Our last one that's going to be before the summer starts, right after Easter, is April 21 and 22. Here's what I feel. Every weekend I'm here, I always feel like, "Man, I want more people to experience this." When I'm at the prayer night, and we're singing together, I'm like, "Man, I just want more people to experience this." When I'm at my Community Group, and we're sharing needs and praying for one another and applying the Bible, I'm like, "Man, I just want more people to experience this."

So, if you still, for some reason, are on the fringes, we want to invite you to the front lines with us. If you find yourself, and you're like, "Well, I've been more of a spectator," we want to invite you to be a participator. Here's our heart here. We would love, as much as you want us to, to come alongside you and help better disciple you and your family, but for us to do that effectively, you need to connect to our church meaningfully.

So, if you've not yet done it, this is a great time, before summer gets crazy, to take the next step to come to our Weekender. It's the inroad and on-ramp into the life of our church. There aren't two ways or ten ways to get connected; there's one. So, let me pray for us, thank God for this night of prayer and worship that we had, and then we're going to be in our second-to-last sermon in this series on the book of Joshua. Let's pray.

Lord, I am so grateful for what we got to experience on Monday night here. We're so excited (I forgot to say this) that we're going to actually be doing another prayer night on May 15 that we're adding, and I just pray that more people would come.

I pray that you would help us to build an environment and a culture and an atmosphere of prayer, that we would have homes where husbands and wives are praying with each other and for each other, where kids are asking their parents for prayer, and where parents are able to say to their kids, genuinely, "I have been praying for you in this area."

Lord, we pray... Our desire here is to take as many people with us into this next season that we feel like is so exciting, and we are so grateful for all you're doing in us and through us. So, I pray if there's anyone in here who needs to take that next step

to get deeper into the life of our church, to connect their family in a timely and consistent and strategic and meaningful way at our church, that they would take that next step. In Jesus' name, amen.

I don't know if you know this or not. There are three great statements in the New Testament. Now, you probably know one or two of them, but I don't know that you know all three. The first one (I'll just give you the easiest one) is the *Great Commission*. Remember that one? JD, actually, when he was here a few weeks ago, taught on the Great Commission out of John, chapter 20. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." That's the Great Commission.

Probably most famous is Matthew 28. Remember that? Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples." Go, make, baptize, teach them everything... We know that. We love that. That's why we plant churches and send missionaries and pray for our lost neighbors and do personal evangelism. We love the Great Commission.

There's a second *great* I don't want us to forget. It's called the *Great Commandment*. You know that one, right? That's that moment where this guy comes up to Jesus... This isn't easy to do, but he's Jesus, and he can do it. They ask him, "Hey, how would you summarize all of the commandments, and what's the greatest commandment?" He basically summarizes it all and says, "Here's the greatest commandment: love God and love each other." Wow.

In fact, later in John 13 he says something. He goes, "Let me double click on that. Actually, I want you to love one another as I have loved you." He puts himself in the center of it. So, we know the Great Commandment, we know the Great Commission, but I think most Christians don't know about the *Great Compassion*. Have you ever heard of that?

The Great Compassion is found in Matthew 25. (We're not going to be there today.) Remember that parable Jesus tells where both the sheep and the goats are surprised at the end? Jesus says to the goats, "I was hungry, and you didn't feed me, and I was thirsty, and you didn't give me anything." He says to the sheep, "I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was in prison, and you visited me."

Both sides go, "When did we do this, and when did we not do this?" He said, "Whenever you did it to the least." The Great Compassion is to care for the needy and the vulnerable, the least and the last and the leftovers of society. It's probably the *great* statement that we forget the most. Well, if you'll type to or turn to Joshua 20, I'm going to show you the Great Compassion in the Old Testament.

Now, as we get there, I know you're thinking, "Okay, Joshua 20. Wait a second, Kyle. Last week we were in Joshua 9. What happened?" Let me just summarize what happens in chapters 10-19 very quickly. Chapters 10 and 11, they fight more battles. They experience more victories. Praise the Lord. They don't have any more defeats. We talked about their two defeats already.

But here's what's neat. Chapters 12-19 are the division of the land. The whole center of the book is the division of the land. I want us to learn two principles that I don't have a lot of time to cover that come out of chapters 12-19 before we jump into chapter 20.

The first is that when you win the battles, when you win the victories with the Lord, the best thing you can do is come back and share it with everybody. That's what they did. They have the whole Promised Land, and then what do they do? They break it up into 12 different parts, and they give every tribe a part. This is like the greatest thing ever.

The oldest stories we tell... They're mythical, but some of the old stories that humanity tells and that are written on caves... Remember the story of the guy who fights the dragon? The dragon, for some reason, always has gold. We're not sure why he has gold and how he got it. You fight the dragon, and you get the gold, and then what do you do? What does the great leader and great warrior do? He brings the gold back to the community and shares it with everyone he loves.

The principle is when you win a battle in your life, the best thing for you to do is to come back and share the victory, share the lessons learned, share the experience with everyone you know. That's why we do the testimonies. Why are we showing these videos where people are like, "Hey, I used to struggle with *this*, and our marriage *this*, and we had a hard time with our kids on *this*, and God was faithful"? They come back and share.

The second principle, I think, from the division of the land that we need to learn is that two of the twelve tribes didn't do well with the division of land. Why? Because they tried to live on both sides of the Jordan. They tried to live in the wilderness and in the Promised Land. How do you become exhausted and ineffective as a Christian? You're not fully in with Christ. You're still trying to partially be in with the world.

Those are the lessons from chapters 12-19 that we're flying over. If you'll land with me in chapter 20 today, we're going to be introduced to something I don't think many of us have ever heard of or ever been taught about before. It's the Great Compassion in the Old Testament. It's the cities of refuge. I don't know if you've ever heard of that.

## 01 WHAT IS A CITY OF REFUGE AND WHO IS IT FOR?

Look with me at verse 1. I'll show you what happens here. ***"Then the LORD said to Joshua..."*** This is the last time God speaks directly and personally to Joshua. After Joshua fights the last battle, he doesn't seem to forget to divide up the land and make sure that all of the people of God get what they need, but (I'm assuming this a little bit here from an argument of silence), basically, what he does forget is he forgets about the cities of refuge.

So God has to kind of knock on his door, speak to him verbally, and go, "Hey, hold on. You're forgetting about the city of refuge." I think it's a good lesson for us to learn, because I think the temptation in the church, especially in the American church, is to forget about the vulnerable, forget about the needy, forget about those who are experiencing injustice, to forget about the least and the last, to forget about the poor and the orphan and the widow and the homeless. That's our temptation.

So God is like, "Okay. My final word to Joshua, then, is going to be to remind him about the cities of refuge." By the way, this is the fourth time God is talking to him about this. So, don't think this is some random, small passage that Kyle is going to try to make a big deal about. No, no. This is taught in Exodus. It's taught in Numbers. It's taught in Deuteronomy.

In fact, look at what he says in verse 2. ***"Say to the people of Israel, 'Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses...'"*** "Hey, Joshua, don't forget about the cities of refuge." Now, what were the cities of refuge? This is important to understand. There were six of them. God strategically placed these six cities of refuge. Three were on one side of the Jordan, three were on the other side of the Jordan.

Here's what tradition tells us. It's pretty cool. The cities of refuge were always only one day away from where anyone would live. So, the first principle of the city of refuge is you could get to the city of refuge in a time of need within one day, which is very important. Not only that. The roads were really wide. The roads to the cities of refuge were twice as wide as any other roads in all of Israel, because they wanted to make it easy for those in need to find help.

Not only that, but it was some of the best signage. There were signs everywhere, tradition tells us, for how to get to these cities. Why? Because, as we'll see in a minute, if you need a city of refuge, you're probably not in the right mind. You may have somebody after you. You may not know where you are or how to get to the nearest one. So, these cities of refuge show up.

Now look at verses 3 and 4. We'll kind of see what's going on here. Here's the purpose. "**...that the manslayer...**" Who is the *manslayer*? We'll get into it. We get a definition here. "**...that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from...**" Oh, *this* guy sounds scary. "**...the avenger of blood.**"

We have to talk about both of these. First of all, the *manslayer*. Who's the manslayer? Well, if you're looking for the most literal, wooden example of it, it's right in the text. It's somebody who committed involuntary manslaughter. Back then... I mean, the world has always been dangerous, but you want to talk about the world being dangerous back then...

Somebody could be in the field. They could both be working in agriculture, and someone's shovel could hit somebody else in the head by accident. That person could die. What if it was just you and the guy with the shovel? Are they going to believe you didn't kill him? Or what if you kill the guy, but it's you and his brother, and now his brother is mad at you, and his brother is going to try to come after you.

So, here's what the cities of refuge were. You'll see this more in a second. They were a place where you could be safe and be heard. They weren't a place, necessarily, where you wouldn't be judged, but you wouldn't experience judgmentalism. You would get a fair judgment and a fair trial.

Now hear me out. A city of refuge... What is a refuge? A *refuge*, literally, is a place of shelter in time of storm or suffering. Here's what it's not. It's not a safe space. Have you heard of safe spaces? Hopefully not, but probably you have. You know, if you're a part of a big company, and it has a big HR department, sadly, you probably have safe spaces. If you're a part of some elite school, they think it's cool to have safe spaces.

Safe spaces in *those* environments basically tell you, "Here's a place you can go, and you won't be judged. Here's a place you can go, and you can escape people you don't like and be with people who have the same ideology as you." A safe space is a place where people go to escape the truth. A city of refuge is where people go because they want to tell the truth and they need the help.

Now, who is the manslayer? We already talked about that. That's the person who accidentally commits involuntary manslaughter, but he has someone after him. Do you see the *avenger of blood*? If that doesn't sound like a Marvel character or a DC character... If they were having an actor play the avenger of blood, who would it be? Liam Neeson or something like that. He has some skill set. He's coming after you.

The avenger of blood... It's important to know this. We're dealing with some technical things this morning, but you guys can handle it. The Hebrew word is *goel*, which most

times is translated... You go, "How does *this* work?" It can be either translated *kinsman redeemer* or *avenger of blood*. You go, "How does *that* work?"

Well, the *goel* was somebody in the family whose job was redemption or retribution. So, most times when you hear about the *goel* it's positive. All of the ladies love the book of Ruth when great Boaz... (I heard a sermon years ago. "Marry a Boaz, not a bozo.") The great Boaz is the kinsman redeemer, and he comes in and marries the widow, and he keeps the family line. That was part of what the redeemer did.

The redeemer was also someone who... If your land was taken from you or you were tricked into this big, high-interest rate debt thing, he comes in, negotiates it, and pays it off. If you find yourself enslaved, he frees you and buys you back. So, there were a lot of things he did that were redemptive. The avenger of blood also handled revenge.

So, if somebody killed your brother, somebody killed your sister, somebody killed your mom, or somebody killed your dad, you went and got the *goel*. You said, "I need you to take care of this. Eye for an eye. Tooth for a tooth. I need you to get back at him." What happens in *this* situation, though... Here's what I want you to understand.

The church has always understood the *manslayer* represents not just the person who commits involuntary manslaughter. It stands for any person who is vulnerable, any person who's needy, any person who's experiencing injustice, and the church is to be a city of refuge. Let me give you a couple of examples of the manslayer today.

Think about the unborn, obviously, although the sad thing is they can't run to a city of refuge. If you ever see a pregnancy care center... When you think of Joshua, chapter 20, think city of refuge, usually led by strong Christian women. You go in there, and it's like... The avenger of blood is after every woman who comes in there. It's the husband. It's the father. It's, God forbid, the grandfather. It's the boyfriend.

These women who are leading these pregnancy care centers are trying to fight for life for our invisible and silent neighbor in the womb, the unborn, the preborn. So, that would be one type of manslayer we need to defend. A second would be victims of sexual or physical abuse.

Why don't people who are sexually abused tell others a lot of the time? Or why don't kids who experience sexual or physical abuse tell anyone? Because there's a cost to raising the alarm, sounding the alarm. I know the #MeToo movement is a mixed bag and people have different feelings about it, but one of the things that did was it reminded us of how prevalent sexual abuse is.

From the stats I read this week, one in six women, at some point in their life, will experience sexual abuse. The #MeToo movement was... Well, you see it in the

movement: "Me too." "Hey, maybe if all of us talk about this, it might be a little bit safer." Victims of sexual abuse, victims of physical abuse... They need a place where they're safe, and they need a place where they can be heard.

How about foster kids and those who need adopted? Could your home...? This is what we're praying for. We launched a foster care and adoption ministry. I told you my wife and I are involved in that as well. It's interesting. We're praying there could be dozens and dozens of homes with Two Cities members in them who said, "You know what? We could be a city of refuge for someone in foster care who has done nothing wrong but would fit in the category of needy and vulnerable."

## **02 PRINCIPLES FROM THE CITIES OF REFUGE**

So, I want us to understand. The conviction here (we'll see this in a little bit) is that Jesus Christ is ultimately our city of refuge, but God wants the church to be a city of refuge in every city it finds itself in. So, I want to give you four biblical principles from this text that help inform how we think about ourselves as a city of refuge. Let me give you them.

The first is, from this text, we see the principle of *law and order*. God is the God of law and order. Theologically and foundationally, where do law and order come from? God. God is the giver of law. It's the representation of his own character. The first thing God does in Genesis, chapter 1, is bring order out of chaos.

Sometimes we don't appreciate the world we live in. The fact that we have a court system in which we believe that people are innocent until proven guilty is an unbelievable achievement of Western civilization that came out of a distinctly Judeo-Christian worldview.

If you read... I mean, human history is horrible, right? If you know anything about human history, if you've read any books on what human history has been like, it has been mostly chaos. For most of human history, most places you lived, the normal thing was chaos and lawlessness, not order and law, not the rule of law.

Do you remember a couple of years ago (there were a bunch of things connected with this) people were calling "Defund the police"? Are you kidding me? That's lawlessness and chaos. Now, do police departments need to be reformed? I'm sure they do, especially certain ones. Does sin infect and affect everything? Of course it does.

But I want us to see that what God did when he wanted to deal with sin and suffering was he set up systems and structures to deal with it. The first principle is the



principle of law and order, flowing from the character of God. It's unbelievable that this existed thousands and thousands of years ago and particularly made a place for the needy, the vulnerable, and those experiencing injustice.

Secondly, the principle of *sanctity of life*. This is an unbelievable reality too, that every person is valuable. Here's the sanctity of life: humanity is highly valuable. See, we live in a culture that is so confused. It's like, "Oh yeah, we're just a little more highly evolved than the animals." Every once in a while, they'll try to show you that.

They're like, "All right. Now listen. You're not going to believe this. We saw a chimpanzee. He had this coconut, and he used a rock to crack open the coconut. Do you see how smart they are?" Listen. We have the International Space Station. We win. There's no comparison. We are so high above. Humanity plays a unique role, highly above the animals, but under God.

Now, we live in a society that's confused, and this is what you would expect. In a society that's haunted by a Judeo-Christian worldview that it had for a long time but is no longer tethered to that, you'll see good and bad together. It seems like the average American values life except if that life is in the womb, and then you can kill it.

Or... I was listening to a guy, and I can't remember if he was in Australia or Europe. He was somewhere like that. He was saying that during COVID... He was talking about his government. He said, "My government locked down everybody, and they told us, 'Stay inside, and do all this stuff. We're going to sacrifice for the elderly.'"

He said, "Just say for a moment you trust the government and that was really the reason they did it. That would be a very Christian value. 'Let's suffer and sacrifice for the vulnerable.'" He said the problem was as soon as the government reopened up, the first thing they started to do was pass bills to euthanize and help elderly people with assisted suicide. Do you see how that doesn't make sense?

Now I know this, because we did *this* building, and we're doing another building. Whenever you do a building, what you find out is there are a lot of things you have to do for people with disabilities. Praise the Lord. Amen. *This* many parking spots and *this* ramp, and *this* needs to be accessible, and there needs to be an elevator. It's a lot, and it's very expensive. It's fine. It's great.

That's part of the image of God. We're going to care for people with disabilities...unless they're in the womb, and then we kill them. You understand that it's not that fewer Down syndrome babies are being conceived. Fewer Down syndrome babies are being born. It is only the Christian worldview that is able to uniquely say, "You are imprinted with the image of God."

So, here's how you know you're valuable. People will struggle. Some of you are very insecure. Some of you struggle with depression. Some of you have a very low view of yourself, and the answer is not self-awareness and self-help and self-expression and self-fulfillment and all that garbage. Here's what it is. Here's what you need to realize. Two things: God didn't make junk, and Jesus didn't die for junk.

You have to feel that. You have to meditate on that. You have to believe that. When God made Adam, he spoke everything else into existence, and then he gets involved, and he forms Adam personally and imprints on him the *imago Dei* so that every person bears the very image of the living God and will live forever, and then Jesus...

I don't know what you can tell a person to give them higher value than "The God of the universe sent his only Son to die a painful death because you were worth it and he loved you that much." So, we live in a society that's confused about the sanctity of life. Here we are thousands of years ago. God puts up structures to care for every person, especially the people we forget.

Thirdly, the principle of *justice and mercy*. When we talk about ourselves, what do we want? Mercy. When we talk about others, what do we want? Justice. We're confused. Symbolically, Christians and Jews alike have looked at God as having two hands, the hand of justice and the hand of mercy, and they must be balanced.

In the Old Testament, there was what was called the *lex talionis*. You've heard of it. It's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Jesus quotes it in the Sermon on the Mount. Then he expands and enhances on it and teaches some things. Well, we hear it and, rightly so probably... You probably hear it with your modern sensibilities, and you think, "Oh, that sounds archaic. That sounds primitive."

It was actually a limiting principle, and it was actually the grace of God. What tends to happen is when somebody does something to us, we don't want to just get them back to the same level; we want to get them back worse. If you don't believe me, listen to any Taylor Swift song. Somebody knocks out our tooth and we want to give them dentures permanently.

So, it was a limiting principle to say you could only do to other people what they did to you, but then the cities of refuge are this image of the complexity and comprehensive nature of justice. By the way, if you're interested in anything I'm saying here, and you want to read more about this, I recommend two books: *Generous Justice* by Tim Keller and another book called *When Helping Hurts*. Both are very helpful.

Tim Keller in his book *Generous Justice* talks about the word *justice*, which is the Hebrew word *mishpat*. He says we tend to not have an understanding of the word

*justice*. In fact, it's an explosive word. Even as I start to tread around it, it's like, "What will we say when it comes to justice?"

If you use the phrase *social justice*, it means 15 things to 4 different people. There's a whole... It's probably more of an internal debate and dialogue among Christians of, like, "Can that phrase *social justice* even be redeemed or do we need to go and just create a whole new category of biblical justice and talk about the difference between biblical justice and social justice?"

All of that aside, let me just tell you what the Hebrew word for *justice* means: give people what they deserve. Now, whenever you say that, here's what people think: "Punishment! That's what they deserve. Give him life. Fire her." When we hear, "Give a person what they deserve," you and I tend to think punishment, but if you look at the word *justice*, and you do what's called a *biblical theology*...

A *biblical theology* is when you trace the word. How is it used in different places in the Bible? It always means to give people what they're due or what they deserve, but sometimes it's punishment, other times it's protection, and other times it's care. You have to hear everyone's case. You have to look at them and go, "What is due this person?"

So, there's the principle of law and order. Thank God for that. There's the principle of sanctity of life, that each human is highly valued. There's the principle of mercy and justice. Then here's the fourth principle: the principle of *social concern*. I hope you know this by now. We here, and I especially am very, very careful of the exact words I choose when I talk about something.

I'm very specific when I'm using the phrase *social concern*. You'll notice that's internal. That starts at the heart level. See, we live in a society that's all about social activism. We live in the volunteer generation. Everybody wants to know, "Can I build wells in Africa? Is there a house someone needs that I can go build in the Dominican Republic?" I've seen this.

People who have no Christian heritage, definitely are not Christians, have this desire to do volunteerism. One pastor said what's interesting... He said he has all of these young people in his church who want to do all this volunteering, and they want to do all this social activism. He said they just don't want it to touch their personal lives.

So, he said he'd have all of these people in his church talking about the poor, but interestingly, no one wanted to live among the poor. He'd have all of these people say, "Man, is the church giving to this ministry? Is the church giving to this area?" and then he would play my favorite game to play: tag, you're it. "Hold on. Are you? Have you given anything to that ministry you're asking us to give to as a church?"

"Oh, no. We haven't."

"Oh! So, you would like the church to give to things, but you don't personally give to things."

This is one of the reasons we haven't done... I'm not against it. Other churches do it, and it's fine. But this is why we haven't done a lot of "Serve Sundays," which are very popular. "Hey, guys. It's a different Sunday this week. We're going to Food Lion, Harris Teeter, and Lowe's, and we're buying canned food."

Then everyone comes home and goes, "Aren't we great? Did you see what we did as a church?" Then no one is willing to look in the mirror and go, "I don't do anything except once a year, as a church, and it makes me feel good about myself, but I'm not personally involved."

When you become a Christian, you experience the grace and mercy of God, and it makes you want to see justice happen in the world. The best way it works... People will debate on this. There's what's called the *conversionist* and the *transformationist*. These are two tribes within Christianity...evangelical, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christianity.

The conversionists say, "Dude, all you need to worry about is people's souls. That's it. Don't worry about anything else. That's the biggest problem. Once they're born again... You know, that's the problem. The problem in that part of the city is there are not enough born-again people. As soon as they're born again, it'll be fine."

I'm sympathetic to that thinking, because it directly says the main problem is the problem of the heart, the problem of the soul, the supernatural power of the Christian faith. By the way, you know you're in that type of church because everybody... That would be like the classic "indie fundie" churches (independent fundamentalism).

Those churches think the greatest thing you could do is become an evangelist, a preacher, or a missionary. "Come, surrender to the Lord. Come up here and surrender and give your life to full-time ministry," because the greatest thing you could do is convert other people and the soul.

Then there are the transformationists. That's Tim Keller. The transformationists almost never talk about going into full-time ministry. They tell you to go into arts, business, politics, and teaching. They basically say, "Hey, bring your worldview, and bring your Christian convictions, and why don't you do everything you're doing but alleviate all different types of suffering." I'm sympathetic to that.

Here at Two Cities we're perfectly in the middle. I'm just kidding. But we believe every person is a soul in a body in a community. So we think, yes, the greatest need is salvation, but there are also people who need shelter. The greatest need is forgiveness, but there are also people who need food.

Sometimes people are so hungry they can't hear the gospel. Most of us can't even imagine an environment like that, but some people's lives are so unstable, and they have so many temporal and immediate needs, that if those needs are not met in a timely and consistent way, they're not going to have the space and margin to hear the gospel.

### **03 NAMES TELL US MORE ABOUT THESE CITIES (HOW THEY SHOULD FEEL AND FUNCTION)**

Okay, that was a long excursion on the biblical principles. Let's go back to the text. I want to show you something in verse 6. We are given the names of the cities. " ***And he shall remain in that city until he has stood before the congregation for judgment, until the death of him who is high priest at the time. Then the manslayer may return to his own town and his own home, to the town from which he fled.***"

It's very interesting. One of the things about this was whenever you went to this city, you had to stay in the city until the high priest died. If you show up and the high priest is 97, you're like, "This is cool." But if you show up and the high priest is 35, you're like, "I'm going to be here the rest of my life." The high priest's death then counted for yours, symbolically, and you were able to leave.

But look at the names of the cities. I won't read you all verses 7 and 8, but I want you to see the six cities in there: *Kedesh, Shechem, Hebron, Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan*. The conviction here is that the church is to be a city of refuge, and I think these six words tell us what a church that's functioning as a city of refuge should feel like. God names these cities.

The first name of the first city is *Kedesh*. Do you know what *Kedesh* means? Righteousness. What should the church feel like for everybody, but especially the needy and the vulnerable and those experiencing injustice? It's a place of righteousness.

What does that mean? We do the right things here. We have the right motives here. We're going to go about things the right way, which is all you have when you deal

with the messiness and complexity of people who are vulnerable, needy, and experiencing injustice.

It's like, how do you know? You have to hear their cases, and who knows if they're telling you the truth, and who knows how much it's their fault and how much it's someone else's fault. This is why most people don't do mercy ministry: it's very messy. The only way through mercy ministry is telling the truth. You're like, "I don't know where I'm going." Tell the truth. "I don't know what to do." Do the right thing.

"Well, someone will get mad. The wealthy people in the church won't like it. This other family won't come." I don't care. We do the right thing here. It's our north star. We do the right thing. That's the only way out of confusing and complex situations. What do you do with the single mom? We do the right thing. What do you do with the homeless person? We do the right thing.

The second is *Shechem*. *Shechem* is shoulder. That's very interesting. Your shoulder in the Bible is symbolic of that which you lean on and that which carries you. You've heard this before. "I need a shoulder to cry on." Part of it is we are a place of rest for people. We are a shelter. That's what it is. It's raining outside, proverbially, symbolically. In here it's dry. It's safe. It's a place to rest.

The shoulder is also that which carries things, especially back then. That's what they did. The way they carried everything was their shoulder. The shoulder was about strength. Here's what you do. When you're dealing with any... This is any person in our church, but maybe especially people with need. You're always trying to figure out, according to Galatians 6, what load they need to carry and what burden the church needs to bear.

Galatians 6 says each person has to carry their own load, but we should bear each other's burdens. The problem in mercy ministry sometimes is the person wants you to carry their load. Sorry, ma'am. Sorry, man. I will not do for you what you can do for yourself. I had a pastor who said one time a guy called him and said, "Hey, man, I'm really struggling to get up for work. Can you call me every morning and wake me up?"

Are you kidding me? Getting out of bed is a load we all have to bear on our own. But that's what will happen in mercy ministry sometimes. Sometimes the church doesn't bear the burdens it needs to bear, and that's where we need to repent, and sometimes the person wants us to start carrying their load. A principle of mercy ministry is you never do for another person what they can do for themselves.

The third word in the Hebrew is the word *Hebron*, which is the word *fellowship* in the Old Testament. Now that's a beautiful picture. You can understand this. Here's what

would happen for the manslayer. You know, you accidentally kill somebody, and the avenger of blood is after you.

Guess what your family and friends do in almost every situation. They back away. They shouldn't, but they do. They're afraid. They don't want to be guilty by association. They don't need any more problems. Life is hard enough. They don't need the avenger of blood on their trail as well. So, basically, when somebody shows up at a city of refuge, they have nobody and nothing.

Part of what the church does, as a city of refuge, is it says, "Okay, fellowship." The heart of the word *fellowship* is sharing. It's the idea of relationship. You'll see people... We see people all the time who come out of broken families, broken lifestyles, transient living where they've lived in seven different cities in the last six years, and they don't have a great relationship with their parents.

They've ruined their life, and they show up at church, and it's like, "All right, great. We'll be your brothers and sisters in Christ. We'll let you see what a real family looks like. We'll let you see what a godly marriage looks like. We'll let you see what godly children look like. We'll let you see what it looks like to live in community and to 'one another' one another."

Fourth, *Bezer*. Now, if I get a dog, that's what I'm naming him. That is an awesome name. It's the idea (I've already hit on it, so I'll just hit it briefly) of fortress. It's the idea of safety and protection, which has been key.

Fifth, *Ramoth*. It's the idea of heights. That's what it means. It's called the *heights*. I love that image. It's saying that when people come to the city of refuge, they're in a very low place. Most times, when somebody is coming to the church and viewing it as a city of refuge, and they're vulnerable and needy and weak and tired and experiencing some type of injustice, they are normally in a valley.

I love what the city of refuge says. "We're going to meet you in the valley. We're going to meet you where you are, but we're not going to keep you where you are. We're going to get you back up to the mountaintop."

Then, finally, *Golan* means enclosed. It means nothing gets in and nothing comes out. It's the idea that you're safe here not just physically. You're safe here. We're not going to gossip. This is not going to define your life. You're not going to be just known from the sins of your past. We always say here that we want to handle the fine china of your life with care.

When someone shares something with us, we only share it with anyone who would need to know, which is normally very, very, very few people, because that's the

principle Jesus taught us. The principle is you keep the circle as small as possible for as long as possible. Remember when he was like, "Hey, if you need to go to your brother because you have something against him, go by yourself. If he won't listen, grab one or two other people." It's the principle of keeping the circle as small as possible for as long as possible.

#### **04 PRACTICALS: WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE AT TWO CITIES?**

Okay. So, what we've talked about is what a city of refuge is, who it's for, the avenger of blood, the manslayer, biblical principles, and how it feels and functions. I want to take a few minutes (I feel like I'd be remiss if not) to talk about how we think about this as a church, because we do feel a responsibility.

We're heading into the center of downtown. I mean, that area... I don't know what you want to call it...under-resourced and up-and-coming, urban poor and urban trendy. There are brand-new young people moving into that part of the city, and then there are some of our greatest nonprofit neighbors who are doing ministry to the homeless and the poor. It's all right there.

So, we feel a responsibility to articulate... That's why I felt like this passage was important for us to talk about. How are we, as a church, going to try to be a city of refuge? First, we're always going to think organizations, not just situations. I've told you that for years. Basically, here's what that means: we want to partner with all expressions of the body of Christ to meet felt and forever needs in our city.

We're building a great building right downtown. It's going to be awesome. But we don't think it is the city of refuge for the whole city. What the church does is point to and partner with other expressions of the body of Christ. We're not going to reinvent the wheel. We are not building 25 different, unique systems and ministries for 35 different needs in our city.

We already have done this before. Someone comes, and they need divorce care. We already know who does that really, really well. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. There are questions about child hunger. We know where. There are questions about homelessness. We know where. There are questions about food insecurity. We know where to go. We partner with and point to all of the different expressions of the body of Christ.

Secondly, we need to be wise in how we deal with need. I told you about the book *When Helping Hurts*. That book was written (and you should read it if you're interested in this) because most people think they're helping, and what they're doing



is making themselves feel good about what they're doing while they're actually hurting the other person.

It's very hard for you to help people who are in need and not make things worse. The chance that you will make things worse is very high if you don't know what you're doing helping someone with need. So, what they said is there are three levels. When you think about need, you need to think about *relief*, *rehabilitation*, and *development*.

Very few people need relief. *Relief* is "I am in such a crisis you have to do something for me right now." This normally happens if a tornado or a hurricane comes. Relief is medical attention, food, shelter, clothing, and physical safety. That's relief. You need relief. Most people need rehabilitation. *Rehabilitation* is they need to learn how to deal with their new normal. It's hard.

You talk to someone, and you're like, "All right. This is going to be a long process of you learning how to live without alcohol. We're going to give you the relationships in a Christ-centered 12-step program or a group. We're going to help you with it." So, there's relief. It almost never happens, very, very seldom. There's rehabilitation, which is connecting people to the relationships they need to live in their new normal.

Then there's development. *Development* is when you help them help others. We all know that. That's part of your healing. Part of how you heal is you stop needing to be the help, and you start being the helper. You start seeing God redeem your past by letting you help others.

Okay. Now that's easy to talk about. That's fun to talk about, because we're going to talk about what the church does. I want to talk for a moment about what *you* can do. How can you be a city of refuge? Hopefully, if you have the Spirit of God in you, if you're a Christian, you're going to want to, even though it's hard. You're going to want to be a city of refuge. Let me give you three things I think you can do for you to personally be a city of refuge.

First, you have to *stay soft*. You cannot be hardened toward sin and suffering. I heard the story of a pastor. (This wasn't in our church.) He went to India. Let me just tell you, if you've never done a mission trip, this is what you'll experience the first 24 hours: you'll be overwhelmed by everything you see. That's every person who has ever gone on a mission trip for the first time. It doesn't matter if it's the Dominican Republic, China, India...it doesn't matter.

You go there, and everybody... I've led trips before. Everyone says the same thing. "I cannot believe how they live here. I can't believe all the poverty. Did you see the children on the streets? It's filthy. I can't believe this." Well, this guy was a pastor, and he went to India. He was walking around with a missionary, and he was

overwhelmed. India is very overwhelming. I've been there. It overwhelms all five of your senses the whole time you're there.

He's saying to the guy, "I'm completely overwhelmed by what I'm seeing." He said the missionary said to him, "Don't worry; you'll get used to it by the end of the week." He said, "I felt like I don't want to get used to it, but I also don't know if I can feel like this all the time." That's how we feel.

Think of medicine. I'm obviously not in medicine, but I've talked to many of you. It's like, the first year of medical school, you're crying in your car. You're like, "I didn't know this many people got cancer." You're like, "Oh my gosh! I just watched the attending tell the mother that the child is not going to make it, and I just cried in my car." But by the time you get out of residency, you're made out of wood. You are somehow able to feel nothing. I don't know that that's maturity.

We have to figure out a way to stay soft. It's two things when you stay soft. You don't harden your heart, and you don't become haughty. That's the Bible's way of talking about pride. We think, "I'm not prideful if I don't tell people the good things, all of the successes I've had." That's not the definition of pride. The definition of *pride* is "I look down on other people."

I heard a pastor who has been leading in mercy ministry for 20 years. He said the number-one reason mercy ministry doesn't work is the spirit of superiority that is in those who do it. "Let me come to your part of the city, and let me help you with your struggles that I've never had."

I heard one guy. He said when you go to poor parts of the city, don't ask people their needs. Ask them their dreams. They have a vision, and it's actually fairly similar to *your* vision. Their vision for their kids is not that different than the vision you have for *your* kids. So, you have to find a way to stay soft.

It will be hard, because many of you... Probably most of us. I'm guessing most of you have no idea what it's like to really be in physical need. Thank God. You grew up in good homes. You've never been poor. You're never going to be poor. You couldn't imagine a universe in which you would be poor.

What you *can* say to somebody is "Though I have never been where you are physically, I have been where you are spiritually. I know what it's like to be spiritually hungry. I know what it's like to be spiritually naked. I know what it's like to be spiritually fatherless." Therefore, the Christian has a unique resource to relate. Stay soft.

Secondly, *get personal*. Do you know anyone in need? You don't have to know a ton of people. Do you know any single mom? Do you know anyone who's like, "Man, this is a person..." Here's the truth. I'm not saying we're malevolent. I'm here to build you up, not beat you up, but let's just be honest. A lot of us have designed our lives to avoid people who are needy and vulnerable.

That's why you don't go to the school you were zoned for. That's why you chose private school. That's why you homeschooled. That's why you moved a long time ago to that nice suburban neighborhood where you could be away from it all. That's why you don't travel to certain parts of the city. What would it be like for you to be able to put just one face and one name with need, to say, "This is one person"?

That leads to the third thing: *do something*. I mean, you can't do everything. You've probably heard the story (this is a famous story) of the kid who's walking at the beach. There was a big storm, so the tide is out, and there are starfish everywhere because of the storm, and he starts throwing the starfish in. I don't know if you've heard of this.

His dad is a little jaded and cynical and sees all of the starfish and says, "Come on. We've got to go. You're not going to make any difference. There are thousands of starfish." The son says, "Well, it means something to *this* one," and throws the starfish in. I think it's like, what could you do... Do for one what you wish you could do for everyone.

How do we try to help as a church? Because it's hard. How do you do this? We say through the Community Group, could you be connected to one nonprofit that meets one need and do that a couple of times a year? I feel like that's a fairly low bar of entry. "Could my Community Group...? Oh, we're going to connect to the pregnancy care center. Oh, we're going to connect to Samaritan Ministries." It doesn't matter.

"We're going to connect to some nonprofit that meets needs in Jesus' name, and we're going to commit to doing one thing quarterly." That would be a great place to start. I want to show you the motive in all this. If you look at verse 9, we get the motive. Here's the motive. Verse 9 is the final verse we have in here.

***"These were the cities designated for all the people of Israel and for the stranger sojourning among them, that anyone who killed a person without intent could flee there, so that he might not die by the hand of the avenger of blood, till he stood before the congregation."***

There's that mention of the avenger of blood one last time. Do you know who the first avenger of blood is in the Bible? God. Remember when Cain kills Abel, and then God says, "Cain, where's your brother?" and Cain famously says, "Am I my brother's

keeper?" Then God says to Cain, "Your brother's blood cries out." What does it cry out for? To be avenged.

If you want the long theological term for the wrath of God, it's the *retributive wrath of God*. This is why hell is not equal for every person. Hell is not equal for Hitler as for somebody else. It's God pays you back according to your sins. The retributive wrath of God. God is the great avenger of blood.

In fact, if you go to the book of Revelation... I mean, he's mentioned many times as the avenger of blood in the Old Testament, but in the book of Revelation, there's this weird scene, to us. There's an altar, and it says the souls of the martyrs are under the altar, and they cry out to God, "How much longer till you avenge our blood?" God answers back, "Just a little while longer."

So, when you realize, "Wait a second..." Let's move away from the vulnerable and the needy, and all that, for a moment. When you realize, "Wait a second. God is the great avenger of blood, and we are sinful," it makes us so grateful that Jesus Christ is our city of refuge. Here's what that means. Here's the principle from the city of refuge.

How does it point to Jesus? He's very easy to get to. Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord can be saved. Not only that. He's for anybody. It's very clear if you read verse 9. No matter anybody, whether sojourner or anyone at any time. Also, the cities of refuge were the only places you could be safe, and the city of refuge freed you when the high priest died.

Well, you read the book of Hebrews, and what does it tell us? That Jesus Christ was our Great High Priest who died for us so we can be freed. The only place where the illustration of the cities of refuge and Jesus breaks apart is that the cities of refuge were for the innocent, and Jesus is for the guilty.

The only thing you need to run to the city of refuge that is Jesus Christ is to confess your need for him, your guilt, and you can find refuge in him. It makes me think what it was like to live in these cities of refuge. These cities of refuge were probably... There were six of them. They had people who had to live there full time.

So, imagine you're the kids of the elders in that city, and you have to grow up there. I wonder what you thought. I wonder if you thought something like, "Man! I don't like living here because everyone's life is always messed up. There are always random people knocking at our door, and my dad has to figure out whether or not they're doing the right thing. There are the avengers of blood, and they're coming at our door, so it doesn't always feel like the safest place here."

I wonder if they thought *that* or I also wonder if they thought, instead (which is what I think they thought), "There's no greater place to live in the Promised Land than in a city of refuge," because it was a place where everybody experienced the grace of God. I mean, imagine.

You go there, and you experience a shoulder and righteousness and fellowship, and you're brought from the lowly places to the heights. Now you live in that city, and somebody else comes knocking on that door. How eager are you to see them experience the same grace and mercy you experienced? So, I think if this church can more and more become a city of refuge, it's going to be the happiest, healthiest, holiest place in all of Winston.

If you'll close your eyes, I want to read you something from Job as we close. The life Job lived is known by many as the picture of the godly life. He's a pointer to Christ. Job really cared about the vulnerable and the needy. In fact, this is what Job said in one of his defenses:

***"...I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth."***

***"If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it (for from my youth the fatherless grew up with me as with a father)..."***

Lord, we read that, and we just think what an amazing man, by the grace of God, Job was. I think any of us who are born again, who have the Spirit of God in us, would like to be our own version of that, motivated by the gospel, because we know that you, at great cost to yourself, purchased our freedom and met all of our deepest and most spiritual needs.

Lord, I pray in response that we would meet people's needs in Jesus' name. I pray you would help us, individually, to stay soft, to be humble, to get personal, and to do something because you first did something for us. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.