

Are We Making a Difference?

Pastor David Brown

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When we talk about revealing things, that's what we're going to be doing for the next two weeks. We're going to reveal some things about our church. We're going to reveal some things about our lives and we're going to look at where God has brought us and where God wants to take us to. So, it's going to be a two week study where we do some work and do a survey and then we're going to stop the study and we're going to go into Contagious Christianity which is our LIFE group emphasis and then after we get the results back, we're going to come back with reveal and see what it showed. It's going to be an incredible thing and I want you to know the reason for it is we have to evaluate ourselves as a church. We have to know where we are so we can get to where God wants us to be. We know our design. We know God wants to take irreligious people and turn them into fully devoted followers. The question is...are we doing a good job? As you evaluate is the church doing a good job, it's really difficult because everyone wants to evaluate based on is it working for me. Am I happy with the Children's Ministry? Do I like the music that's being played? Are the sermons keeping me awake? All of those things do not evaluate the spiritual growth of the church. It evaluated whether you like the programming or not. You see, the old system of church was to go out and get people to come in and then keep them so busy, get them so active and if someone was active we knew they were fully devoted followers. That means you "Sunday morning only" folks were just a step above pagan. You're going to get into heaven naked and smelling like smoke. You're barely going to get there, but you're going to get there because it's by faith not by works and so we started looking and you came back on Sunday night, you were getting there but if you came on Wednesday night, you were highly elevated; you were on the track and here was the kicker...Tuesday night outreach, tada, halleluiah you made it, fully devoted follower. So we got people so active in church and we thought there's a good sign, but you know what we discovered? It's not, because you can go through all the activities in the world and your heart not change. You can go through all the activities in the world and you not be any closer to God today than you were a year ago. You can put on a smile and act like you're godly but it doesn't measure the heart. As I was growing up and coming through seminary and college, this is how they told us how to evaluate whether our church was doing well or not. In fact we do a church letter each year just to see how we are and all we really do is look at the other churches and see if we're doing better than them. It's all it's about.

There are three areas that they taught us pretty much if your church is growing. The first area we look at is our budget. Are we meeting budget? Are we exceeding budget? Is our budget growing every year and they tell you if your budget is growing every year then you must

be doing the right things, you must be doing a good job because you're making a profit. Isn't like most companies? Isn't how they evaluate? Oh no, God's blessing the churches who have the bigger budgets. We'll if that's true then God's really blessing the porn industry because that budget goes up every year and more and more money is spent on it. So, you can't look at budgets and decide whether or not God's blessing your church. It has nothing to do with it.

So the second step for people was to look at buildings. The church must be doing well; the church is growing if you're building buildings. Really? This church went 35 years and never built a building. I have seen churches that haven't built a building in 50, 60, 70 years. Are those churches not doing well? Are they not doing what God has called them to do? Are they not being faithful if they're not building buildings? Ah, but the last one; here's the spiritual one, the kicker. We know if a church baptizing, well then there it is! That's got to be the sign whether the church is healthy or not; as long as a church is baptizing people then that's wonderful. Here's the trouble with baptisms. God is the only one that does that. We've never saved anyone in the entire existence of our church. We've led them to salvation but God does all that so can we really take credit for that? And then I began to evaluate our church. Through the twenty years that I've been here I looked and there were times that our budget wasn't doing very well. There are times that we were way behind budget. There were times we were so far behind budget that we didn't have the money to pay the bills that we needed to pay. There were times that you put all the bills in a hat and you drew them out and when you ran out of money you wrote a letter to the other people and said listen we'll try to get you next month. If you cause a problem, we're putting you at the bottom of the list again so watch your response. We were in bad shape; we went nine months one time with a toilet that was broken because we couldn't raise \$1400 to fix it. So if we're going to talk about budgets, we've been hurting. I've already mentioned we went 35 years without building a building. Baptism's; there was a year in the last 20 years that we baptized 6 people the whole year. I know some of you are like, well that's 6 people in the kingdom, come on that's about half a person per hundred. That was unbelievable how bad all those things were going and while all those things were horrible as I looked at the life of the church; God was doing something very incredible. As I looked at the life of the church I saw people's lives changing. I saw people loving one another; I saw people caring for each other. I saw our people going out into the area and ministering and volunteering and I saw some incredible things going on while all of those things weren't going well and we decided as a church the only way to evaluate are we successful was in one thing. Life change; that was it; are people's lives changing because they've come here. Are people's lives changing; are they becoming fully devoted followers. Are people growing in their relationships with God; are people connected with one another? Are people still serving in and outside the church? If they're doing those things then we are being successful. Now I know a lot of you are going wait a minute, you know what ...it's not your problem all you need to do is preach and you give me programs to go to and you do bible studies and I'm responsible for my

own spiritual life, it's nobody's business. Have you said that? How about this one? My relationship to God is a private matter. It's just between me and God. Boy that sounds good, but it's not biblical. In fact, according to the word of God, you're salvation, you're faith is a public matter and whether or not your growing is a public matter and we love the verse, we're going to talk about it Wednesday night, judge not lest you be judged. Let me just give you a little commercial about Wednesday night, that's not what that verse means inside the church. What that verse means is you don't condemn those outside the church, but inside the church we're to hold each other accountable. So your faith is not a private matter between you and God. In fact, let me tell you something frightening. A lot of you in this room, I'm directly responsible for your spiritual life. Not all of you, just those of you that have chosen The Avenue Church to be your home. Those of you that have plugged in and said that I'm a member at that church; I'm part of the family. I am directly responsible for your spiritual growth. The bible tells us that one day I'm going to stand before God with you and I have to give an account of the way I've taught you and the way I've led you. You think that doesn't weigh heavily on the staff's heart? Do you think we don't carry that with us as we look at our church and we realize that God one day is going to ask us if we were accountable for the stewardship of the people that he has brought to us? Do you think that doesn't weigh on our hearts to know that it's one thing to be a mile wide but it's something much bigger to be a mile deep? It's not about growing in size. Listen, anybody can get a crowd, the Dallas Cowboys can get 90,000 people to come and watch them. I'm telling you we could blow this place up. All we have to do is give away a vacation every week. Free trip to the Caribbean; come to church and one couple's going to the Caribbean. You'd be all over it. You know how we could raise our budget? Put all of your offering envelopes in a big barrel up here in the front, pull one out and give you double what you put in. We could get a crowd. It's not about getting a crowd. It's about getting a core of people that want their spiritual lives to be deeper and richer and want to know God more. Now, all churches have tried to measure life change, it's a hard thing to measure. When we talk about religion we start talking and thinking man, that's my business and I don't think we ought to talk about where I am spiritually. Well I understand. It's because you grew up not talking about it. I grew up not talking about it. My dad was a Catholic; my mom was part of the Christian Church, whatever that was; so we just didn't go to church. We didn't know anything about church. We just didn't go. We had a good moral family but church was not part of our DNA; not something we did. I remember one evening we had gone to Westlake Louisiana where my father is from and we were staying with his brother and sister in-law. We were spending the night. They woke us up at about 2 o'clock in the morning and they carried us to my maw maw's house which was really tiny. That's why we didn't stay there in the beginning. We woke up the next morning at our maw maw's house and I was like what happened; come to find out that night around the table the brothers and sisters started talking about religion. I'm sure they had been a couple of rounds of alcohol; probably more than a couple and they began

to talk and it led to an argument and they began to holler and fuss at one another and almost got in a fist fight whether Catholic or Baptists were right so my parents picked us up and took us out of the house and it was a big weekend of fighting. How exciting. Don't act like you all haven't done it. Don't be out there judging me; you all have crazy family. Don't pretend you don't have a crazy family and if none of you have the crazy cousin, guess what...you're the crazy cousin so get over it. But anyway I learned at an early age we shouldn't talk about this. It causes problems but I want you to understand it's a conversation that we've got to have. Now, some churches have tried to do it. Some churches have tried to measure life change. How many of you grew up in church? Raise your hand; okay several of you went to Sunday school remember that? You got an envelope and on the top it said my giving to the unified budget, remember? Why it said that I don't know, but that's what it said and then it had a checklist. Do you remember the checklist? You had to check the boxes. This is how we evaluated your spiritual growth. Here we go. The first box was present. I always wanted to see the guy that turned in the envelope that wasn't present. How does that happen? What did that guy do? Did he come by earlier in the week? If you were present that was twenty percent of your score. It's kind of like school you show up and you get credit. Then, here is the second one...on time. You all stink at that by the way! Wouldn't half of you in this room get any credit for this one. I look out at 11 o'clock and there are eight of you. I come out to preach at 11:30 and I am like, whoa! I'm glad you did; I would have hated to preach to eight. I would be in a real bad mood. I'm glad you came but none of you would check the on time. Well you get 10 percent for that because how hard is that right? Then here is the big one. This really shows your spirituality, bible brought. If you brought your bible, that's 10 percent. Listen you want to mark your spirituality? How big is it? Get the biggest bible you can get and if you really want to be seen as a scholar, get one of those study bibles. You don't have to read it; you just have to bring it so there is part of checking your spirituality. Then it goes on and here's a good one...offering. That was only like 10 percent too so you had to give an offering. Then if you studied your lesson; here was a big one and its one none of you did. Anybody study their lesson? You must have been teaching. That was 30 percent. Then if you stayed and listened to the preacher you got 20 percent. Because why this is important at the bottom of the card it said total grade. See, this is how we evaluated life change. If you came with a 70 you needed to work on your life. You need to get a bigger bible and bring it next time. The problem is a lot of you because people are going to see this you would just check that anyway because you didn't want anyone to see that so you could have 100. Does this really look like a list that represents your spiritual life? To me it looks like just some legalistic rules that we set up and if we check all these we can smile at God and say look God we made 100 today at church. Now there was a new one for a lot of you. When we got real evangelist, they added a box that said invited guest. Remember that? It didn't matter if the person went to church every day as long as you invited them. Life changes...now I want to read what the bible says about life change

instead of a bunch of legalistic rules, listen to the word of God. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 he writes and we urge you brothers warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong but always try to be kind to each other and everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the spirit's fire, do not treat prophecies with contempt, test everything, hold on to the good, and avoid every kind of evil. Man nowhere can we get around; this is the list of things we need to be doing and he says if you've accepted Christ, if you've been justified, if you've asked Jesus to come in your life and forgive your sins, the first step is justification. He says here's a list of things that I want in your life because as these are in your life, verse 23 is the heart of it. Verse 23 is this is why these are there. Put these things in your life, do these things. Now may the God himself sanctify you completely and may your whole soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ so it's not just salvation; it's not just being justified; there is a second step. It's called sanctification and that's a big old church word that I want to break down for you. It is a process that we go through do become like Jesus and he says this is what I want. Now, sanctification is different than justification. None of you in here did anything to get salvation. None of you. God didn't look down on the earth and say that guys pretty good; I'm going to save him. No; we are saved by grace and grace alone but sanctification is something different. Sanctification is the power and presence of God in your life but it takes an action from you. Let me read it in the message bible. May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole make you holy and whole, put you together spirit soul and body and keep you fit for the coming of our master Jesus Christ. The one who called you is completely dependable. If he said it he will do it. Here's God's heart; this is what God wants. He says once I save you, once I bring you in to my family, I want you to move towards sanctification. Now did you really think that all that God wanted in your life is for you to walk down and get dunked by somebody and that was the end of it? Did you really think that God saved you so you could sit there and not change your life? Did you really think that he saved you so you could continue in your old habits, in your old ways and have your blessed faith, have your assurance and have your fire insurance and not go to hell? Did you really think that's what God wanted? Honestly, what kind of Christianity is that? Where God saves you and leaves you alone? He doesn't, he wants to sanctify you, he wants to make you holy, he wants to make you pure, and he wants to bring you along. He says do this, do this and do this so I might sanctify you. Listen, you're not doing these things to gain salvation. Salvation is already been given. That's the justification over here on this side. You have been saved and are continuing to be saved every day. As you move toward salvation, as you move toward knowing God you are sanctified and God begins to make you holy and pure. He begins to take the things out of your life that hold you down. He begins to make you look more like his son until the day that he glorifies you, where he completes the work that he started. When we enter into his kingdom, he completes that sanctification. Listen

this is God's power and God's presence but it takes movement on your part. It's takes movement on your part. I came up with a list. I really fought this. I really didn't want to come up with a list. Do you know why I didn't want to come up with a list? Because some of you are going to say I knew it! He talks about grace, grace, grace, grace and as soon as he gets me in here he starts giving me a list of things to do. I knew he was going to do that! Well I want you to look at the list and we'll evaluate the list. I want you to see it because let me make it real clear; it's all over the place. In Thessalonians it says for God has not called you for impurity but in holiness. In 2 Timothy 8 and 9 therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord nor me as prisoner but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God who has saved us and called us to holy living. Ephesians 1, 3 and 4 blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who is blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world. In Romans 8:29 for those whom he foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. So why did he save you? Why did he predestine you? Why did he call you? To move you into the image of his son, that's what God desires in your life; for you to be holy. In our church we've made it real simple. We've given you a road map, Know, Grow and Serve. If you wanted to be a fully devoted follower, if you want to have spiritual maturity, know grow and serve. I did put a list together and like I said I really fought the list but I asked myself some questions. Is anything on the list extra biblical? Is there anything not specifically in the bible? I looked at the list and the answer is no. Is there any moral codes in the bible; any of my own understandings of right and wrong is any of that in the list? No. Are there any traditions that we've held up in the church that are on the list? No. Can this list be used by someone to think that they are better than someone else? Yes, I mean today I can write this list and you can look at it and think that somehow you're better than someone else, but that's not the problem with the list, that's a problem with your heart. So don't use this list to compare yourself to others, use this to compare yourself to Jesus as God helps you become who he wants you to be.

If we had blocks on our cards the first one would say, in a living relationship with Jesus. Now I want you to look at that. You're in a living relationship with Jesus. I didn't ask you if you were baptized. I didn't ask you if you're part of the church. I didn't ask you if you grew up in the cradle roll. I didn't ask you if you were in Awana's. I didn't ask you about any of that because none of that matters. Are you in a living relationship daily with Jesus Christ? Is Jesus the most important relationship in your life? If the answer is yes, good; let's move to the next one. You need to develop deep relationships with other believers. Do you have deep relationships with other believers? Let me tell you what deep relationships is not. Seeing somebody on Sunday and saying how are you doing? I'm fine how about you. How 'bout you? Doing great; did you see the game Friday? Yeah, great game. How are your kids? Wonderful, yours? The same. Hallelujah praise Jesus I have a friend. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about someone that you care about and you care about you and when something

good in your life happens you want them to know and when something bad in your life happens you want them there beside you. Do you have those people in your life? Now, you say I got friends they just don't go to church. Wow, that's not good. When you're going through marriage problems and you have a lost friend what do think a lost friend is going to tell you? If you develop problems with alcohol what do you think an alcoholics going to tell you? You have problems with lust what do you think a lost guys going to tell you? You need other believers to do life with and let them hold you accountable and for you to grow. There's another step, are you using your spiritual gift in the church? Some of you are like I didn't know I had a spiritual gift. If that's so you need to know that the bible says that everyone who accepts him God gives a special gift to and it's used for edifying believers. In other words, God gave everyone of you a gift that you are supposed to be using here in this church. Whatever gift it may be you're supposed to be using it here in this church. There's a place for you to serve. Everybody has a place to serve. There is something here that you need to volunteering to do to make things happen and I know a lot of you guys are sitting out there thinking what I'm not working with the children, I can't stand children. I understand, I'm not changing a diaper. I don't even change my grandkids dirty diapers. Some of you are saying I can't be a greeter; I don't like to talk to people. I've met you; you shouldn't talk to people, I understand. Some of you are out there thinking really basically I'm just a big jerk. Well we have a place for you. We're starting a security team, you're going to be perfect on that team because let me tell you if somebody walks across that parking lot with a backpack with a AK47 sticking out of it, I don't want you asking them if they need a hug. I want you being a jerk. There's a place; everybody has a place. If our church doesn't have the ministry that you're supposed to be in then you start it. Are you using your spiritual gift? Let's go on. It's not enough just to use your gift in the church you have to discover your mission outside the church. That is so important. That's why that old model didn't work. We got all the old people in church so busy they never had time to get in the community. They never had time to know their neighbors. They never had time to volunteer to do anything. We want you out in the community. There are so many opportunities. Here in our church we have a homeless ministry. Every two weeks they go to Dallas, T-shirts and Tennis Shoes. They feed people who are hungry; they do things. There are ministries all over the place, Waxahachie Care, Women's Resource Center, Ellis County Woman's Job Corp. There are ministries all over the place like Daniels Den. You want to be involved; we want you to be involved. Every member that is fully devoted has a ministry in the church and a mission outside the church so are you doing anything to serve the people that need Jesus? It's one of the boxes I'd have. I'd also have a box that said actively sharing your faith; one of peoples biggest fear. We're going to have a series for six weeks helping you become a contagious Christian; teaching you how to actively share. I want you to see the word actively because I have people all the time that say, I am a witness with my life. My whole life is a witness that I belong to God. People know there is something different about me; people just

watch my life. Okay I will give that to you. You walk into work Tuesday morning and someone falls to their knees and gets saved, you never have to speak another word for Christ. If you walking into a room and they see your life causes them to want Jesus, you're good to go because that doesn't normally happen. You need to be actively sharing your faith. Now here's a big one, this is why our church has a family ministry, it's why our church talks about family, it's why our church concentrates on it; if you're going to be a fully devoted follower you are leading and loving your family. Let me tell you at the end of the day you may do all of this but if you haven't done that you disqualified. You've got to lead and love that family. That's next to Jesus the most important relationships you have in life. If you can't lead and love your families then don't spend your time up here. Fix that; get that right. Finally you'll love this one...giving. Six million dollar debt you better be giving. Giving to local church. You say, oh well I give it's just not here. Well then you're not following God's word. Now, if you missed the sermon a few weeks ago and you're saying I knew he'd get around to money, be careful, don't say that out loud because the people that were here know that if you talk about money that's your problem with money, it's not my problem. It must have a hold of your heart because that's part of being a fully devoted follower. Now I don't want you to look at that list and check it off as a legalistic list but I guarantee you every one of those things are straight from the word of God. There's no moral value in those, they are straight from the word of God. There's no tradition in it. It's what God has for each of you if you want to live the way God has called you. Holy and blameless. Sanctification. I told you earlier that it's our responsibility as a staff to move you from point A to point B. We know the church is going to grow in number. I mean honestly this is a holiday weekend and there's not a lot of room in this building right now. We're going to explode in numbers and if we were looking at budgets, buildings and baptisms we would pat ourselves on the back. But we want to look deeper than that and we need your help. We have a spiritual survey coming out online. It's under knowgrowserve.com. It starts on September the 12th, it's a two week time period. I want you to honestly evaluate your spiritual walk. Now, it's anonymous, no one knows who writes it; no one will know who you are; you don't have to put your name anywhere. There is no way to track it; we're not smart enough to track down your computer and go oh, it's them! We have no idea. It's goes into a big database, in two weeks they send us a report and they let us know where our church is spiritually and I can't tell you what a valuable tool that is. But it will not be a valuable tool unless you sign up, take 20-25 minutes out of your life, fill it out honestly and get it turned in. Now for those of you who don't have a computer, we are going to set them up in the church, they will be at our office. You have no excuse not to do it; we need you to do it because we are serious about taking your spiritual depth seriously. We want you to walk in a deeper relationship with God but to do that we've got to know where you are. So please concentrate on that. Reveal, we want to rip away and see what's inside. We want to know where our church is. This morning you need to know where you are. Got to rip back the curtain that hides your heart. You look here; are you living

in relationship? Do you have people in your life that hold you accountable that love and care for you? Are you using your spiritual gift in the church? Are you working outside the church to reach those who need to hear? Are you actively sharing your faith? Are you leading and loving your family? Are you giving to the local church? There's a checklist there for you, not a legalistic list but a list to let God look at your heart. Where are you today?