

## ***Woodlawn: A Heart Transplant***

Good morning!

Let's begin with some trivia. How many of you know who Christiaan Barnard was? I'll give you a hint. In 1967 he did something for the very first time...as a surgeon.

He was a South African cardiac surgeon who performed the first successful human-to-human heart transplant on December 3, 1967. It was considered a miracle at the time.

If you've been watching the news over the last few months, Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland have dominated the coverage of an ever-widening gap in our society over color and racism. Not only is it heartbreaking, but it also shouts to the world that the heart of our nation has a problem that no one seems to be able to solve.

It's clear that our country has some deep issues that are not being cured by money or education or politics or rhetoric, and that's because we need to address the root, not the fruit. The real issue is a spiritual problem and to solve it America needs a heart transplant.

Consider what Benjamin Watson, a black NFL player for the *New Orleans Saints*, said recently to *CNN* regarding the solution for the unrest in Baltimore:

*"Without a relationship with God, without our hearts being changed we're simply just putting band-aids on bullet wounds...but God wants to give us a chance to really love our fellow man and that only happens through a relationship with Jesus Christ."*

A chance? Could this be an opportunity for real change? Could something wonderful come out of such a national tragedy, as miraculous as Dr. Barnard's surgery? Is it even possible?

The answer is definitely YES...because it has happened before!

In the stirring new film, ***Woodlawn***, we see this same Baltimore scenario resurrected in Birmingham, Alabama in 1973. Birmingham was a deeply divided city with forced busing and integration aggravating a bubbling pot of emotion, still roiling from its previous civil rights conflicts in the 60's. Genuine hatred seethed in this city.

Enter an unlikely hero, as unlikely as David was to Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7,

*"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'"*

The Woodlawn High School football team in Birmingham, Alabama was a true underdog that faced a Goliath not only on the field, but even more so off the field with racism, hatred, and prejudice that had burrowed deep into the hearts of these teenaged Alabamians.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we know that He can perform heart transplants and change our attitude about divisions of color, nationality, gender, position, and every other division that separates us.

When we truly believe in Jesus Christ, “*when God shows up,*” as they say in the film, God changes our hearts. And that can also lead to massive changes to an entire city, and a spiritual revival can take off.

As Jesus said in John 13:35,

*“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

And that is precisely what God did in Birmingham, Alabama through a high school football team that was insignificant.

Before I give away too much of the story about future NFL star Tony Nathan and how the Woodlawn football team impacted Birmingham, let’s take a look at the trailer for ***Woodlawn***:

[Woodlawn](#)

This is a powerful movie, not only because of the relevance for America today, but because it is based on a true story that resulted in real quantifiable change!

A story that not only transformed a football team, that eventually played in the largest high school football game in Alabama with 42,000 fans (and 20,000 turned away), but also started a revival that lasted for 10 years in race-charged Birmingham!

So when someone says racism doesn’t exist, not just between blacks and whites, but also between every other people group, or that it cannot be fixed, don’t you believe it. There are genuine and deep divides that can only be solved when we understand the solution, and make no mistake...there is a genuine solution as Benjamin Watson said, but first we need to see the problem in its spiritual context.

The truth is, according to the Apostle Paul, that we are all divided and infected by an attitude of superiority that comes from alienation from God.

## **Divided We Stand**

Let’s look at what Paul said about our divisions in Ephesians 2:11-12,

*“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”*

When Paul uses the phrase, “uncircumcised” to refer to the Gentiles, the Ephesians knew exactly what he meant—this was a derogatory term, an insult to the non-Jews who were in the eyes of the Jews beneath God’s chosen people. From the Jews’ point of view, the world was divided into two groups. The Haves and the Have-Nots. Those whom God loved and had made a covenant with, and everyone else, the Gentiles, who were alienated from God.

When we are given a gift, a skill, a position, or a special anything we naturally turn it into an opportunity to separate ourselves from the crowd. We see ourselves as above the other guy and special. So it was with the Jews who began to think that they were better than the non-Jews, and saw their chosen status as an elitism that made the rest of the world their inferiors.

Remember the Pharisee’s prayer in Luke 18:11-12,

*“And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘**God, I thank You that I am not like other people:** swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’”*

The Jews considered all Gentiles dogs and their self-righteousness was very real. Is that what God intended? To elevate the Jews and make the rest of us feel insignificant?

The Law, the promise to Abraham, God’s provision and protection of Israel, all got twisted in the Jews’ minds in thinking that they were in His special care because they deserved it, when in fact He had done this for them to shine His righteousness to all the other nations too. They were to be a light to the world and not a haughty, self-righteous, racist people.

God meant for Israel to be a giant, neon billboard flashing to the world that there was one righteous God who loved us all. They were to be His light in a dark world for the rest of us.

But the Jews saw themselves as superior and the Gentiles were missing out on their five special privileges. Namely, that we as non-Jews were:

- *separate from Christ*

- *excluded from citizenship in Israel*
- *foreigners to the covenants of the promise*
- *without hope*
- *without God in the world.*

We were lost, but ironically...so were the Hebrews who thought that by just being Jews and keeping the Law made them righteous (much the way most Americans think they are Christians because they're Americans)!

They had demonstrated their own inability to keep the Law in magnificent fails over and over again because their sin got in the way, and yet they maintained their arrogant self-righteousness. So naturally the Gentiles began to treat them accordingly (anti-Semitism) throughout history. Racism was in full bloom.

We see this same racist attitude in a threat to Tony Nathan and his family in *Woodlawn* too:

**(Quit Football Brick) 57:00 to 58:42**

Isn't that sad? It is a mirror that each of us needs to look at, and realize that we all share that same human nature that erects barriers between ourselves. Perhaps not as obvious as a brick thrown in anger in Birmingham, but we wall ourselves in just the same at work, in sports, in our neighborhoods, and even in church.

We tend to think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Romans 12:3). It's human nature. We get our identity by looking down on others.

And the New Testament Gentiles were no better than the Jews, mistreating and denying women equality, slaves and masters, rich and poor, Jews and Greeks, and the abominable half-breed Samaritans and Jews. The list of divisions goes on and on. In fact, whether Jews or Gentiles, we all have an innate sense of self-righteousness and quickly build walls and pedestals to separate us from the Have-Nots.

Why is that? Why do we instantly dislike someone or see them as beneath us?

Because we are all infected with the same prideful attitude that we are better than we really are. But from God's point of view, none of us are righteous...we're all "flagged" as lawbreakers. And that is the real problem; sin has alienated us from God and each other.

## **The Penalty Flag**

*"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all (James 2:10)."*

When you break a rule in the game of football, the referee throws a yellow hanky onto the field to alert everyone of a rule violation. God has done the same thing when He gave us the Law in the Old Testament, but He takes it even further and says if we break just one point (perhaps a lie, cheating, or stealing something) then we are guilty of breaking all of His Law (murder, rape, incest, etc.)!

Can you imagine if the referee didn't throw a penalty flag during a game, but threw the whole NFL rulebook at you? You weren't just "off sides" or guilty of "roughing the passer," you broke EVERY rule!

Why is God so severe? Is he a cosmic Tyrant bent on seeing us fail? Absolutely not! He demonstrated His love at the cross (Romans 5:8-11) and died for us when we were His enemies.

It is because His standard is Himself...absolute holiness, utter, and complete perfection. Otherwise, Heaven would be no different than Earth if sin were there too, right? And in that field of play, in His stadium of complete holiness, "*we all have sinned and fall short of His glory* (Romans 3:23)."

So then, why did He give the Law to us? Is it some cruel hoax to set a standard we can never meet?

The Jews mistakenly thought that by keeping the Law that they would be righteous and please God, but their track record throughout the Old Testament was just the opposite. They failed miserably, over and over, and had to admit that they could not keep God's holy Law.

And we are no different as Gentiles. No one's perfect, right? So what gives? What good is the Law if we cannot keep it.

That's because the Law wasn't something we could ever keep, Jew or Gentile. God gave it to us as a spiritual thermometer, not to make us well (righteous), but to show us how sick (unrighteous) we all are, and need divine help...a Savior.

Just as Paul said in Romans 3:20,

*because **by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.***

The Law shows us we are not righteous and can never be righteous by trying to be good because we become aware of our sin problem.

Good works, no matter how many we do, never take into account all of our past sins that must be punished (or God is not a righteous Judge). God doesn't use a giant scale to weigh our good deeds against our bad deeds. He uses the standard of absolute holiness, perfection.

As Jesus said in Matthew 5:48,

*“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

We see the end result of our sin in Galatians 3:10,

*“For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.”*

We are all under a curse because of our sin and that sin has ruined our hearts, and they need to be replaced with a new heart that can forgive injustice and love unconditionally. How do we do that? Look with me at what happens when Hank Erwin speaks with a racially divided Woodlawn football team about this transforming love.

**(Choose Jesus) 14:15 to 18:09**

An unbelieving Coach Gerelds asks a good question, *“What just happened?”* And the answer is God just performed a heart transplant...to a whole football team...by faith alone...with no good works at all.

## **The Right Play Call**

*“that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; **for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness**, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.” **For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek**; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:9-13).”*

So what is faith, this winning play call, this gospel message, that can do what the world can never do in Baltimore or Ferguson, unite a divided people, and change hearts?

It is simply to repent (change your mind) about your trust in being good to be righteous and trust (sincerely believe through faith) in what Jesus did for you on the cross when the perfect Man, God in the flesh, became sin and took God’s wrath on Himself in your place.

*“He made Him who knew no sin (Jesus Christ) to be sin **on our behalf**, so that we might become the **righteousness of God** in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).”*

He took our death sentence and when you repent and believe, God's Holy Spirit will literally come into your body and change your heart! You will gain God's righteousness in Christ.

Look at Ephesians 1:13-14,

*In Him, you also, after **listening** to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also **believed**, you were **sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise**, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.*

Let's take a look at what this divine surgery looks like in Woodlawn's Coach Gerelds' heart:

**(Coach Gerelds Conversion) 47:05 to 51:22**

What I absolutely love about that scene is that immediately after believing he takes a step of faith, an action, to reveal what happened in his heart to the whole congregation...he gets baptized! Real faith will take action and we see that same action in what happens next in the film in Birmingham, Alabama (but I won't spoil it for those of you who have not seen it yet).

And then he went on to live out his faith, as one of his former players attested to recently.

*"Coach Tandy Gerelds was a fine man and a fine coach, and he had a lot to do with a lot of players on that team coming to know the Lord," Brad Hendrix, a senior defensive end on the '74 team, says. "We dedicated our season to the glory of the Lord, and we played at a much higher level those two years (1973-74) than we probably should have. You could call it inspiration, you could call it whatever you like."*

That's real faith...it has real works behind it that demonstrate God's changed a life and just like David, He looked at his heart and then drafted a player onto His team.

## **One Team**

Let's look at the rest of our original text in Ephesians 2:13-18

*"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.**"*

When we become a Christian, a genuine believer like Coach Gerelds who acts on his faith, God does an amazing thing—He doesn't make us equals, per se. He makes us one team!

It's just like a married couple. They are not equals...they are one! God has merged us into one body when we become a Christian, and that kills the hatred. As Paul says, in Ephesians 5:29, "...no one ever hated their own body...." God has "*put to death their hostility*" at the cross.

At the cross, He reconciled us. We are at peace with God because the price for sin has been paid and we are at peace with each other because we are one in Christ's Body, the Church. This is the only way to solve hatred and racist attitudes. God must change our hearts through His Holy Spirit's possession of us at our conversion.

God "sets aside" the Law and makes a new humanity, "*one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace...through the cross.*"

When we are reconciled with our God and our fellow man, then that can lead to the same miraculous citywide results we see in the film. If we love one another like the Woodlawn football team anything is possible—even revival!

## **Revival**

*"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35)."*

What if this current situation in Baltimore is really a golden opportunity for the gospel, as it was in 1973 in Birmingham, to start a national revival?

Perhaps another Hank Erwin will show up and start another "Jesus Revolution," as he showed in the film with the *Time* magazine cover on June 21, 1971. And perhaps you are that Hank Erwin for today's cities like Baltimore. Am I crazy to think this? Let's go back 100 years from Birmingham's crisis.

Consider this conversation with Dwight Moody, the famous evangelist of the 1800's who helped spark a worldwide revival from Chicago to England and Sweden, and his British revivalist friend, Henry Varley:

*During the afternoon of the day of the conference Mr. Moody asked me to join him in the vestry of the Baptist Church. We were alone, and he recalled the night's meeting at Willow Park and our conversation the following morning.*

*"Do you remember your words?" Moody said.*

*I replied, "I well remember our interview, but I do not recall any special utterance."*

*"Don't you remember saying, 'Moody, the world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to him?'"*

*"Not the actual sentence," I replied.*

*"Ah," said Mr. Moody, "those were the words sent to my soul, through you, from the Living God.*

*As I crossed the wide Atlantic, the boards of the deck of the vessel were engraved with them, and when I reached Chicago, the very paving stones seemed marked with 'Moody, the world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to him.' Under the power of those words I have come back to England, and I felt that I must not let more time pass until I let you know how God had used your words to my inmost soul."*

The world has yet to see. Could someone here today, in this room, be the D.L. Moody for our generation and launch a new revival like we saw in **Woodlawn** for Baltimore?

I asked these questions at the beginning and I'm asking them again now:

Could this be an opportunity for real change? Could something wonderful come out of such a national tragedy? Is it even possible?

I believe it can happen again, as it did in 1875 with Moody and one hundred years later in 1975 with Woodlawn High School in Birmingham, Alabama. Do you believe God could turn our current situation around with His gospel message today? Could Baltimore and Ferguson be shown that light?

Brothers and sisters, we are that light, as Israel was to be in the Old Testament, we are that light today as the Church; a united body that joins all of us into one team for Jesus Christ. Is it possible? I believe it is as possible as Birmingham was in 1973 because God has not changed.

Let's commit to pray for revival in our nation. God can do it again!

And in closing, to guard each of our hearts from any elitist attitude that may creep into our hearts, let me end with this story and a reminder that color isn't the only barrier:

*We were the only family with a child in the restaurant. I sat Stacy in a high chair before she squealed with joy. She pounded her fat baby hands on the high chair tray. Her eyes sparkled in laughter and her mouth was bared in a toothless smile as she giggled with excitement.*

*I looked around to check why she was so happy and to my shock, it was a man in dirty clothing with uncombed and unwashed hair.*

*Although we were a few tables away from him, I was sure that he had a foul smell. His hands waved as he playfully talked to our baby. "Hi baby," the man said to Stacy.*

*"What are we going to do?" I asked my husband. He simply shrugged and smiled. Stacy continued to laugh and mumble, "Da-da." Everyone in the restaurant started staring at us. The old man was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby, I thought to myself.*

*When our meal came, the man started shouting from across the tables, "Hi there baby. Do yah knows patty cake? How about peek-a-boo?"*

*My husband and I were ashamed, but not Stacy. She kept on playfully communicating with the old man. After eating, Stacy and I rushed for the exit while my husband went to the cashier to pay the bill. He told me to meet him in the parking lot. The old man sat between the door and me.*

*"God, please let us get out of here before he speaks," I prayed. As we approached the man, I turned my back, trying to avoid him so that he wouldn't notice us passing by. However, Stacy leaned over my arm, reaching for the man with both arms in a baby's "pick-me-up" position. Before I could stop her, Stacy had propelled herself from my arms to the man.*

*In what could have been a very profound moment in my life, I saw my beautiful baby and a very rugged old man express their love and kinship. Stacy, in an act of total confidence and submission, laid her tiny head upon the man's shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover in his eyes. His hands full of dirt, pain, and hard labor, cradled my baby girl. No two beings have ever loved so deeply for knowing each other for only a short time. Awestruck, I stood there frozen.*

*The old man cradled Stacy in his arms and as his eyes opened, he told me in a firm voice, "Take care of your beautiful baby."*

*Somehow I managed to say, "I will." He pried Stacy from his chest lovingly and gently gave her back to me.*

*I received my baby as he said, "Bless you, Madame! You have given an old man the best gift he could have ever hoped for!"*

*With Stacy in my arms, I ran for the car. My husband was wondering why I was crying and holding Stacy so tightly. I was also asking for God's forgiveness.*

*I had just witnessed God's love shown through the innocence of a child who saw no sin and made no judgment. The child saw the man within while her mother saw the outward appearance. I was blinded by what a naked eye could see, but my child was not. I felt as if God asked me if I am willing to share my child for a moment when He shared His Son for eternity.*

*The ragged old man had reminded me of a Bible passage, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3).”*

Folks, we need to change, to be born again, and that change comes when we allow God to give us a heart transplant with His message of reconciliation. Only in changing hearts with the gospel of Jesus Christ can we have a revival in our nation like that in *Woodlawn* that sees everyone through His eyes.

Let's pray.