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**WHFC Summer**  
**Part 7 – Avoiding Toxic Positivity**  
Pastor Ted Cunningham

We are coming into the fall and, on top of everything else going on, we've got a presidential election taking place. I told Amy, "If I don't get a presidential debate, I'm going to be mad. I've been looking forward to this for months and I want a presidential debate. How many of you would pay \$500.00 pay per view for a presidential debate right now? I would do it. You owe it to me, America, for all that I've been through. Anyway...

I'm in a mood today, I'll be very honest with you as we talk about *Avoiding toxic Positivity*. It's this new term that you're probably seeing more online. As we talk about it, I just want to start by asking the question. How many of you would consider yourself an optimist? How many of you would consider yourself a pessimist? The hands are a little slower going up. How many of you would consider yourself a realist? Yeah... "I just say what everybody else is thinking." Right? That's what the realist says.

Pictures have changed over the years. I want to go back a hundred years to pictures. You know, when we had to keep the shutters open for a long period of time to take a picture. Smiles were harder to hold, so they would just go to these frowns. My family, to this day, still takes pictures like this. The Ludwigs and the Samstags and the Cunningham family, whenever a camera comes out at social gatherings... I don't know what it is in our family. We all turn, face the camera, and slouch and frown. I have no idea.

You see it's changed. Here's the new way of taking pictures at family gatherings. It's the "everything is awesome" face. It's no longer smiles, it's just... I don't even know what was going on a minute or two before this picture was taken, but the camera comes out and we're all in this mouth open, over excited pose all the time. We're fired up and ready to go.

Today, we're going to compare and contrast toxic positivity with biblical positivity. We're going to talk about that everything is awesome, only good vibes going out... You hear Christians say this sometimes, "We only want to put good vibes out into the universe..." Whatever that means. "... so that they will return to us." And we're going to talk about how damaging toxic positivity is to our mental health and to our soul care.

Here's a definition of toxic positivity. This would be a clinical definition. *"Toxic positivity is the excessive overgeneralization of happy and optimistic state in all circumstances and it denies negative and painful experiences that make us human."*

You see, **toxic positivity**, as we'll see today, is focused on **circumstances**. "Let's make sure we don't even deal with it. I know things are changing, but let's pretend they're not; let's just move on."

"Whatever your circumstances are, everything is going to be great. Good vibes only. Everything is awesome." Yet, as followers of Jesus, we are centered on the person of Jesus. Circumstances are always changing. Jesus is not. He is our foundation. That's why we sang to start the morning in 2 Corinthians 10: **5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.**

Hebrews 3 - **1 Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.** Turn your eyes on Jesus. Your circumstances right now... We are in a season of constantly changing, but Christ is not.

Hebrews 13 says, **8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.**

Now, churches tend to use toxic positivity. And I'm going to say this... it's unintentionally. I don't think they set out to do this, but they'll unintentionally use toxic positivity to maintain organizational momentum. "We have budgets and we've got buildings, so everything is always awesome at the church." The problem is this denies what people are going through emotionally with their experiences and with their needs.

One of the reasons, on Saturday night, you'll never see me post these three flame emojis and say, "Tomorrow morning's sermon is going to be lit!" There are a lot of reasons why I don't do that. One, it's not me. The church is constantly, "We've got to keep everybody excited and at all times!!" The reason we don't say that is because it's like the boy who cried wolf. You come in and you're like, "That sermon was okay. He lied. It wasn't lit." Our social media people will ask me, "What do you want to post on Saturday?" "Just tell them it's going to be an average Sunday." I've actually put on there, "It's going to be okay. Don't get your hopes up."

I remember Rick Warren told a small group of us, "To win in the church, you don't have to win with homeruns; you only have to win with singles and doubles. As a Cubs fan, that rested on my soul. And we are not in the constant stage, as a church, with "it's awesome" because that's not where a lot of you are at right now. The problem is, when we're constantly spinning this toxic positivity and excitement and we're at full throttle all the time, it's unsustainable; you can't do it. This is why Christians burn out. This is why pastors burn out. Everything always has to be LIT!!

My kids are like, "Please stop saying lit, Dad. It's terrible when you say lit." but I'll tell my kids it's going to be lit and it's like, well it wasn't. We tend to spin it up and we want people to think everything we're doing, all the time, is going to be awesome and we deny what people are really going through.

So, as we talk about this, as we go through this, as we compare and contrast, let's look at some of the differences between the two and what the scripture has to say.

**Toxic positivity says, "Don't be sad, be happy."** Be happy all the time. Only focus on good emotions. If difficult or painful emotions hit you, deny them. Don't deal with them.

But that's not what the scripture teaches. **The scripture says, "It's okay to be sad."** We're in a season with a lot of loss and a lot of grief. In Ecclesiastes 7, we read, **3 Frustration is better than laughter...** As a guy who likes to make people laugh, I know laughter has its place, but frustration and sadness is a great teacher. Do you remember how we said, early on in this pandemic, there's a lot we need to learn, But maybe we don't to teach it right now? We need to be in a learning season.

If you think about a tweet... This is a toxic positivity tweet and maybe you've seen some like it. Here is just an example. "If you don't come out of this quarantine with either a new skill, starting what you've been putting off like a new business, or more knowledge, you didn't ever lack time, you lacked discipline." I get these tweets all the time, "You should be writing a book right now. You are home, you've got nothing else." Listen, I haven't written a book. I haven't wanted to. I haven't been there. I tried writing a song in June. I sent it to a friend in Nashville. He sent it back and goes, "Keep working on that. I like where you're going." Paul Harris, I hope your watching. I think it's a good song.

But here's how one therapist responded to that tweet and I love it. "If you don't come out of this with a new skill, a new business idea, or more knowledge, it's perfectly normal." Why? Because this isn't summer vacation; it's a pandemic. We're dealing with things and everybody deals with it in different ways. Toxic positivity is like just happy all the time, good things all the time, but right now, we are in a season of learning. We need to learn **because a sad face is good for the heart** and we should not run away from it. Toxic positivity says don't focus on it, don't look at it.

I love what one therapist said, "We've got to get good at acknowledging, recognizing that multiple, complex emotions can exist in you all at once." We don't shy away from those here at this church. It's why we aren't into the toxic positivity in our church family because we know many of you are dealing with a lot of pain right now, a lot of hurt, a lot of loss, and if you come into a church environment where we are super excited all the time, you're like, "Man, I ain't there." Do you know what happens when you are super excited all the time, people begin to look at you and think, *You're not relatable. You've never been through what I'm going through because everything is just great.* "No, it great; we're just focusing on the positive, good vibes only."

No, we're learning and a lot of us... **4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning...** A funeral should change you. It should get you asking all of the right questions. ...**but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.** It's okay to be sad.

Ryan Pannell gave me a definition this week of biblical positivity. He's a therapist in our church that I come back to often. *"Biblical positivity uses difficult emotions to connect with God and allows his love to cast out fear and heal pain."* You should listen during times of difficult circumstances. You should listen to what you're feeling. That's because much like physical pain... If you have something growing under your skin on your arm and it gets more painful, at some point, you go, "I should probably get that checked out." It's the same thing with emotional pain. A sad face is good for the heart.

Here's another tragedy towards mental health and soul care. **Toxic positivity is about avoiding pain and denying reality.** But biblical positivity says **embrace pain.** And not only embrace pain but **enter into the pain of others.** One therapist put it this way: *"Encouraging a person with toxic positivity is*

*encouraging a person to remain silent about their struggles.” We’re dealing with something right now as a nation. Therapists are actually calling it collective trauma. And according to recent studies, 40% of American adults are saying that they are dealing with mental health issues on some level. And 25% of young people are saying that they have struggled with suicidal thoughts during this pandemic. Toxic positivity pushes us towards isolation. “People obviously don’t want to hear it because people are just telling me to be happy all the time.” They say, “Don’t be so negative.” But I need to work through that.*

This clinical social worker, Heather Monroe, puts it this way. *“Toxic positivity is the idea that we should focus only on positive emotions and the positive aspects of life. It’s the belief that if we ignore difficult emotions and the parts of our life that aren’t working as well, we’ll be much happier. The problem is toxic positivity oversimplifies the human brain and how we process emotions...”* And I would add how God has wired us, how he has created us. *“...and it can actually be detrimental to our mental health”*

This is why we have the Lament Psalms. We can take pain to the Lord. We can return to Christ. This is what I loved about Rene Schlaepfer example of paddle boarding. If you want to find balance during your first lesson on a paddle board, what do you do? You look toward the shore. It’s stable, it’s secure. Toxic positivity is the waves, biblical positivity is the stability.

My wife and I went fishing years ago in San Diego. There were about 30 of us on one of these boats where you pay \$50 or \$60 to go out for four hours and they just take you to fish. You drop your line and you catch them like crazy. There were 28 of us that ended up violently ill. I mean we lost everything. We were in the galley with our hoodies pulled over our face. My wife, whose has never been motion sick a day in her life... She has her dad’s Navy blood in her. She never gets sick. As fast as she could put on a sardine, she and another lady were back out there. We’re begging the captain to turn the boat around. We were an hour in and done. We were all lying down next to each other. We looked like... The scene was terrible.

I said, “Turn the boat around,” and the captain said, “I’ve never turned a boat around.” He said, “You have to convince those two to turn around.” I go, “I’ve got one that is completely in and she will turn this boat around.” I can’t explain it, but I’ve been seasick enough to know as soon as that boat hits the shore and I step on land, I’m fatigued, but the sickness is gone.

Many of us in these times don’t know how to process this or what to do with this, but today, as we talk about biblical positivity, turn your eyes upon Jesus. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is unchanging. Keep your eyes fixed on him with whatever you're going through.

*“The problem is, toxic positivity oversimplifies the human brain and how we process emotions, and it can actually be detrimental to our mental health...”* and I would say soul care. We don’t want to push people towards isolation; we want to encourage people. You can take on the pain of others even. I want to give you... If you have your bibles, turn to 2 Corinthians 1. As you’re turning there, look at 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. You see the tone change between these two books, these two letters that Paul wrote to the believers of Corinth. In the first letter, he has to correct them, he has to discipline them, and he’s dealing with a lot of abuses in the church. They received it and they did something with

it, except the false teachers. False teachers were antagonized by the discipline and they started to spread lies about Paul.

When you get the second letter, 2 Corinthians, it has more of an autobiographical tone to it because Paul finds himself in a position... He's not correcting like he did in the first letter. In this letter now, he is defending his character and his apostolic authority, and you see a tone change. So, if you read these two letters as a unity... But I want us to look at Verses 3-8 and I want you to circle the number of times you see the word *comfort*. The word *comfort* here means encouragement, exhortation, and it even means cheer. We are going to see that we are partakers in the sufferings of Christ, which means we are also partakers in the comfort of Christ.

Here's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1 - ***3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort*** (all encouragement), ***4 who comforts us in all our troubles*** (all of our tribulations and all of our painful circumstances), ***so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*** This is very important in Verse 4; I want you to see this. If you only come to Woodland Hills to receive comfort for you, I want you to be encouraged during this season to take a step, to move in a direction of being a comfort, entering into the pain of other people, being a comfort to others.

A true test of your maturity and sincerity in the faith is what you do with the comfort you have received in the Lord. You may have been at this church for years, or you've been part of churches for years, you've been in small groups, and you have received comfort. And you have received comfort, you've been through difficult season, churches have mourned with you through loss in your life, but you never find yourself returning it to others. What Paul is saying in Verse 4, so that we can... Yes, we are comforted, but we become comforters. We begin helping other people in their troubles in the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

***5 For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ... We are partakers in Christ and in his sufferings. ...so also our comfort abounds through Christ. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm... Because it is established in Christ Jesus. ...because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure... I want you to see what the Apostle Paul is saying here. ...so that we despaired of life itself.***

We always want to put the positive stuff out from Paul. We have them on coffee mugs all the time – “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” You'll never see this on a coffee mug. Somebody drinking coffee at work from a cup that says, “I despaired of life itself.”

Follower of Jesus, we do not have to run from painful, difficult, and some would even say negative emotions. We can listen to them. We can try to understand what's really going on; they are information. And we can help others who are going through pain as well.

Galatians 6 puts it this way, ***2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*** When you step into the pain of another person... That's what empathy is. Empathy is saying, "You are hurting and that matters to me. I want to help you with that." This is why, as a church, we avoid toxic positivity in social media posts. We don't get up here all the time all excited and cheering because we know that's not where everyone is at. We don't want to push people away. We don't want to push people toward isolation.

The other side of this... We are going to get into some of the terms and some of the language you may see on social media. **Toxic positivity – Failure is not an option.** "Nope, you just keep going, keep going, keep going." But what does the Bible actually teach? **The Bible says, Repent, learn from mistakes.** One of the reasons the church moves away from... And many of you grew up in church 30 – 40 years ago where sin was dealt with firmly every single week clearly. It was talked about, it was preached. New generations have moved away from that. Why? Because sin can be difficult to talk about.

I read an article this week. It's one of the reasons why many of us don't want to engage in the racism conversation. It's because it's too painful to discuss what's really going on. And if we're in a culture of toxic positivity and just good vibes only, the conversation you want me to have about my past and about what I'm feeling towards someone of another nation, tribe, or tongue, I don't want to get into that. But we call that sin; we call it out. Why? Because Christ is good news. We can talk about anything. We say we can discuss anything as a church because of Jesus.

I have friends that go, "Well, we don't talk about that too much. We don't want people to feel shame or guilt. No, we talk about that so you can be freed from it. We deal with that painful past... I think about subjects... People are like, "Ted, you talk about abortion too much." Listen, if you've had an abortion, find freedom in Jesus. I know it's painful to talk about. I know it's a difficult conversation, but He sets you free. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Avoiding the conversation, avoiding talking about it, stuffing it, not being able to share it with others, that's helping no one. We can talk about it. We can enter into that with you. We can work through that.

James 5 puts it this way: ***16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*** I John 1:9 – ***If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*** Back to James 5: 16 – ***The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.***

A verse that we've been teaching our kids for years is Proverbs 26:11 – ***As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.*** We teach our kids that we allow mistakes in the Cunningham home. What we're trying to avoid is making the same mistake over and over again.

Here's another **toxic positivity** statement that maybe you've seen online. **Never give up.** Again, we know what commitment is to the church and to marriage and to family, but sometimes people are like, "If I don't stick with this thing I'm dealing with and working through right now, I'll look like a quitter." But what does the Bible teach? **The Bible teaches surrender.**

Years ago... I can tell you the name of the church, but I pastored at The River and it's wasn't going well. Many of you were there. I was ready to leave and a friend brought in a seasoned pastor. His name is Mel and he's from Texas. My friend rented a pontoon boat on Taney Como and we went out. My friend's goal was to get Mel to talk me into staying. I was ready; I was done. I threw my hands up and I was waving the white flag. My friend was like, "No! You're sticking with it and I'm bringing in an old pastor to prove my point."

Mel is in his mid-70s. He sits down. He was a great listener and responded with emotional responsiveness. He was so engaged. I shared my story. My friend said, "I want you to start from the beginning and go all the way through to the end and don't leave anything out and then we're going to let Mel speak to it and what you should do."

I shared. There were moments when I was mad, moments I was in tears; I worked through it all. Mel would ask questions for greater clarity throughout it. I'll never forget at the end of the boat ride... We were fishing. We weren't really focused on fishing. We had lines out in the water. I'll never forget what Mel after I shared the story. Mel goes, "Ted, I'm going to tell you what you need to do." My friend and I both leaned in. This is exactly what he said: "It's time to shake the dust off your boots and mov on."

My buddy went, "What!? I brought you here from Texas. I rented a pontoon for hundreds of dollars to save this pastor, to save this church." I asked Mel questions for greater clarity. I'm like, "Mel, but do I look like a quitter?" "Yeah... but what..." He said, "How much energy do you have in life?" I told him and he goes, "Let's just put it toward something that has kingdom impact and right now, you've exhausted it there and it's time for you to shake the dust off your boots and pursue something else."

I want to give us some help on how we can help people with our language. When we're trying to minister, when we're entering into the pain of other people, how we can avoid toxic positivity in our statements?

So, we're going to give you some statements. If you Google this or research this any, you'll see there are some main ones that people say. Avoid saying this to people because it's just not helpful and we want to be helpful. Here's the first one. I would call this a statement of toxic positivity. Somebody shares something with you. They're struggling in an area and your response is "Look at the bright side." They're like, "I'm not there right now." Let's look at the bright side. Let's just look at the positive vibes only. Put those positive vibes out there. What if you said this, and I think this is more helpful: "What you're going through is not easy; how can I help?" That is far more supporting and encouraging.

Julie Schlobohm on our staff was referring to these statements this week and I love it. She said, "These are walkaway statements." Isn't that what a lot of it is. We just want to be able to say it so we can be gone with the situation because we're dealing with enough of our own stuff to try to help someone else.

How about this next one? "You'll get over it." That always helps. Has your spouse helped you this week with that one? "Oh, it was a rough day at work." "Ahh, there's always tomorrow." That's not all that helpful. What if we said this: "This is difficult." Just acknowledge that it's difficult, that's it's painful.

When you've gone through stuff like this before, what lessons did you take away from it? How did you learn? How did you grow?

How about this? This always helps. "Stop being so negative." Yeah. Has it always helped you when your spouse tells you that you are in a bad mood? Does that encourage you? "What's your problem today?" "I'm just dealing with some stuff." "Well get over it; we've got stuff to do." What if you said, "Are you doing okay?"

My wife does this very well. I'm telling you, the mood changes in our home when Amy will just simply say, "What can I do for you today? How can I help you today?" How simple is that versus "You better get over your mood pretty quick, buddy?" That doesn't help. You can just see Jerry Seinfeld go, "I come out in the morning and my wife will ask me a question and I'll give the answer and she'll respond in a weird voice with, "Oh, you're not going to do..." He goes, "I don't talk like that in my home, but my wife thinks I do. Who is talking like that?"

How about this one? Almost every therapist I read this week said this was one of the worst statements of toxic positivity you can make to someone. "It could be worse. I know your life stinks right now, but have you thought about how bad it really could stink?"

Brian Regan says, "have you ever seen a kid lose their balloon and they go nuts. The balloon floats off into the sky and they are screaming. A good parent goes, "Oh, knock it off. It's a balloon." Brian goes, "You know what I'd like to do? I'd like tie that dad's wallet to a balloon. The dad would be freaking out. Because it's all perspective."

It could be worse. "I know it's bad, but I want you to spend a little bit of time going even more to a darker place. I want you to really process this. Your self-talk is bad right now? Let's make it as extremely terrible as we possibly can." Some of you are like *I say this all the time*. How about if we said this: "I hate that you are going through this. I'm here for you when you need me. How can I help?"

This week... I'm going to tell you, this week, I watched one of the best resignation sermons I've ever heard. It was from a man that I have admired and loved for years, John Ortberg, the pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California. He is going through a very difficult season in his family and in his church. He has pastored there for 17 years and he resigned and gave a message. It's 20 minutes. I'd encourage you to go home today and Google John Ortberg farewell.

It made me want to resign. I'm not gonna. I'm sticking it out with you; there's a pandemic (Laughter). It could be worse, Ted! You think this is bad; you could live in California. That's terrible. I don't know if you're from California (Laughter). Stop complaining about your life. There are people literally living in Illinois right now (laughter). It's that mom that goes, "I know it's august and I don't know what I should do. Are we supposed to buy back to school clothes or more alcohol? What are we doing right now?"

Let's get back. I was very emotional. It's 20 minutes of a message and John says you will not find the word goodbye in the Bible. Goodbye has its origin around the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. It's an abbreviated term for God be with you. His entire outline of the message was God be with you. He went through all different

seasons and stages of life in the church. He went through all different season and stages, saying God be with the young people, God be with our old people. He said, "...of which I've become one while pastoring you." God be with you, God be with you. It was one of the most hope filled... I know the circumstances and you may Google what's happened at the church. I just want to encourage you. Don't get caught up in all the details; let's be people that are not outraged all the time, but we're entering into the pain of other people.

Here's why I think the message so ministered to me this week. So many of my pastor friends this week are like you better tune in 8, 10, noon" with such extreme excitement. I'm just exhausted by it because they are okay preachers, but they are not that extreme all the time. To hear a pastor get up and be real and to share his heart and soul with his congregation as he said goodbye...

And then he said this, and it's been with me all week. He said, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a story to be lived." And he said, "Right now, I'm in the middle of my story."

I think sometimes we use the toxic positivity because we think it's the end. There are people in our town where businesses are shutting down. Some of you are questioning your business and if it will make it through the pandemic. Your questioning what you've done for a living your whole life and you're wondering if it's going to work. You are not a problem to be solved. God is still writing your story. I think sometimes we think if this happens, that will be the end, so we won't even think about it. And the toxic positivity hasn't helped you one bit.

I've been pondering this thought all week after I heard John share that last week. Let us treat people as image bearers of Almighty God, not problems to be solved. I think it's unintentional; I think most of us say things in the toxic positivity category to try to help people, knowing it doesn't help, but we're just trying to solve the problem. As Julie said, they are walkaway responses. We need to enter into it with them. Walk through whatever stage of grief they are in. If you want to mourn with someone who is mourning, enter into their stage of grief rather than inviting them into yours.

A friend of mine told me this week when I asked about how he and his wife were doing and he goes, "I hope she's getting better as she's going through grief in other areas of her life." I was like, "Just stay there with her. Don't rush out of it. Don't invite her to your stage of grief; sit with her in hers."

Every single person in here is personally autographed by God, which gives you automatic, intrinsic value. You are valuable and that is why you are to be esteemed as valuable. Through creation, you are an image bearer. But through salvation – faith alone in Christ alone – you are a child of God.

For some of you... To me, all this toxic positivity leads to **hype** and nothing drains the soul quicker and nothing gets people's struggle with mental health more than hype. And we never want to be a church that's hype, that's just spinning people up to keep the numbers growing, keep the budgets growing. We want people to be healthy. We want people to walk in the fullness of Christ and that's why we don't offer hype, we offer **hope**. May that be what this church is always about.

I heard one professor share it this week. He said, “When we deny these unpleasant emotions, we actually make them bigger.” And he didn’t say this; I’m adding this: but when we invite Christ in, he sits with us. In our trials and our tribulation, he’s a comfort to us. He walks with us and rests with us. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, the author of your faith, the perfecter of your faith, the finisher of your faith. He’s writing your story. This church always wants to be a church, this family always wants to be a family that enters into whatever it is you are going through.

And I can tell you this. Yes, we have organizational needs. When you have a group this size, there is all sorts of organization that goes into it. But for this church – and I’ve always been grateful for it – it’s the heart of the elders, congregational needs come first – where you are at and helping you. This is why when we take offerings and we thank you for your generosity, we truly are grateful for it because it allows us to prioritize congregational needs.

We will always put organizational needs... Again, it’s important; I’m not minimizing the organization and the importance of it, but we aren’t going to be led by hype. We’ll let organization take place, but it’s always the health of the church that we are concerned about, not the growth of the church. And we focus on that and with each other.

This week when you post, enter into the pain of other people. Rather than another opinion or another debate, enter in with people, help them work through whatever difficulties they are going through. Respond in your comments not with positive vibes only. No respond with “I’m sorry you’re going through this. I’m sorry this is painful. I’m here for you; how can I help?”

Father, it’s in the name of Jesus that we thank you for this church, for this family, for this local body that when we gather, we are wanting to minister to the real needs of people. May we always prioritize the needs of this congregation above budgets and buildings. May it always be the priority for us. May we always run to hope and away from hype.

May toxic positivity in all that we do never define this church. May we find joy in the Lord. May we enjoy our times of laughter together, but may we understand the complexity that is in a body such as this. May we treat people as image bearers of God, in what they are dealing with and what they are going through, and not a problem to be solved.

I pray for John and Nancy right now that you would work in their lives and in their family and in the church in Menlo Park. Bring healing there that I now you bring, and I know that that church is resting in you. May the Ortbergs rest in you. May Menlo Park rest in you.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus, they are an image bearer, but not a child of God. That today they would place faith alone in Christ alone. That they would confess their sin, they would confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord, they would believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead, they would invite Jesus to be their Lord and Savior. May today be the day of their salvation as they place faith in Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus and everyone agreed and said... Amen.