

## **“It Starts With Love—The Stranger”**

**By Chris Ulrich**

**Sunday, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

I really appreciate the music this morning. How many appreciate the music? I know that, “Let Me Be a Little Kinder,” when I was working on the message the first day, it was something that I believe God laid on my heart, and it was something that I knew that I had to let Parrish and the band know in time that they could practice. I know that Parrish is old-school, because when I called, I asked, “Could you guys do the song, “Let me Be a Little Kinder?” he said, “You mean the Otis Redding song?” So, anybody that’s old-school and knows Otis Redding, and I’m like, “Yeah. No, I think it’s the one that we’ve done here in church on a number of occasions. I appreciate that; it really ministered o me. I know that Jeff Lynch used to do that song a lot, and he and his wife, Terri are down in Charlotte. North Carolina heading up our fellowship down there. I talk to them every now and then, so keep them in thought, keep them in prayer. I expect them to be at conference. too.

I know, I think this past week, I’m still kind of recovering, I think we all are, and I don’t even work outdoors, so I feel for guys like Ken and the two Ed’s that deliver mail, and people that work outdoors, because I see some of these guys bundled up and it just got me thinking about historical-type of cold weather. I mean the kind of thing where your feet are cold, your hands are cold—and that’s indoors! It’s the kind of thing that just makes you pray to God that all the equipment works, all the pumps keep running and the pipes don’t break. I know for me, the coldest day I remember—and I’m not going to talk long about this—it was -24, this was Christmas Day, 1980, back in my bay area where I grew up, outside of Boston without the wind chill. Does any body—not wind chill factor—but does anybody have a colder (now don’t give me 90 below with wind chill) does anybody have anything colder than that? Brent—Minnesota guy? they cancelled school because it was 37 below zero. Vince? It was -27 here in 1985. You were in the Navy at the time. Anybody else? Parrish? -27 in the Navy in Ballston Spa, New York. Gerry—another Minnesota guy? -45 in Duluth Minnesota. In 1982 it was 62 below with the wind chill. Not the wind chill, not the wind chill. Bob? Fargo, North Dakota: 70 below zero. Probably when you were driving a truck, too. Okay. My Dad was stationed up in Thule, Greenland in the late fifties, and we asked him one time what was the coldest it ever got, and he said -60, but he also said you really had to worry about the snow snakes. We’re like little kids, and we’re like, “What?” He said, “If you get bit, you freeze to death.” Me and my brother, we went to look that up, and it’s kind of like, “Come on.” You get into stories like that, but...

That was quite the message, Parrish, last week. I appreciate that a lot. One highlight I know—for any of you that weren’t here last week, there was quite a few points, and I’m going to get into couple of them. It was something he mentioned an article he had read about God and gangs—a Newsweek article—years back. Really, I’m not going to try to rehash the entire comments, but, one thing that really stood out to me was that the gist of it—and correct me if I’m wrong—it had to do with availability, and having eyes to see the situations of those around us. We can’t always meet everybody’s need, but God can. We look at the example in Acts 3, Peter and John at the Temple, and they were outside the Temple, and there was a man that was lame. Basically, he looked up a them, hoping to receive something, maybe some change or something like that, but, they said, “Silver and gold have we none, but, such as we have, we give to thee. In the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk.” Those are the kind of things that we’re going to have in abundance because God gives them to us. It’s not going to be ‘at times,’ you know. The Bible tells us that faith without works is dead. It’s not a matter of we’re not able to give financially, or food, or shelter, or things like that. Just this past week, a couple of people—I’m not going to mention them by name, they know who they are—were able to help some other people out with some shelter, some food. One guy bought another guy a guitar yesterday. I look at stuff like that, and that’s heart-felt. We’re all on pretty much fixed incomes; it’s not like there’s an abundance. Those are the kind of things that minister to people and change people’s lives, and keep people in the race.

**John 13:35** *By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*

The theme of this month has been, is going to be, “It Starts With Love.” I’ve got to say that’s a good way to start the year. You highlighted four points last week Parrish, Love from God, Love for God, Loving ourselves, and Loving others. I want to delve in a little more deeply in this week on the loving others aspect. Not that I feel it’s any more or less important than the other points, it just so happens to be where we’re going. So, I want to ask you some questions. I’m not necessarily looking for responses like with the weather—that was enough weather talk, thank God we’re thawing out and that I don’t have to work outside. I worked outside in the military and we really had to dress up. Do we really think we can love and care for people we hardly know or maybe don’t even know at all? I mean, is it possible? It is possible. The title of the message today is, “The Stranger” and we’re going to look at some verses and I’m going to share some personal accounts that pertain and try to get an understanding of how God wants us to see it.

In a lot of ways, the term itself seems carry more of a negative than a positive connotation, nowadays. Most of the time we associate it with such expressions as “Don’t talk to strangers,” or “That guy is a weirdo, he’s strange.” Although, sometimes you have an expression like, “Truth is stranger than fiction.” It has a little bit of a variation of meaning, but it’s still kind of similar, it’s staged within a realm. One thing I would say is, because of that change in meaning, that the term is associated with, but I learned quite a bit, as I was preparing this message, that changed my opinion, it changed my understanding. I’m not saying that it as like a knock-it-out-of-the-park... like, “Oh, I can’t believe I never saw that!” it was never that difference-making, but it was certainly something that swayed my views.

**Matthew 25:31-41** *When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

I was a little surprised to see how often the word stranger actually appears in the Bible and the meaning associated with it was different that the impression I personally had come to understand. I’m not an advocate for being unsafe, not locking my doors, or just being willing to trust anybody, but how did we get from there to here? What I mean by that is, has the term been whittled away gradually over time to take on a whole meaning? I used a couple of expressions, like, “That guy is a weirdo, he’s strange,” or “Don’t talk to strangers.” I get it; we’ve got to protect our children and there are a lot of—I’m going to just put it bluntly—perverted mentalities, and people that practice things that are just absolutely ungodly. Reprehensible, I would use that term. We have to be protected, but, when we look at it like, the stranger, for all practical purposes, Jesus is calling himself a stranger here. We understand the story, and He talks about when, “...I was a stranger...” and when we ministered to them. It goes on, and we didn’t read that portion where it talks about when I was a stranger, and you came not, or ministered, or things like that to

help, and, basically, God is saying, “Depart from Me, ye workers of iniquity,” or depart into everlasting punishment.

I’m going to share a story: I was at O’Hare airport, probably 3 months ago—leading up to that, in the weeks prior to that, I think God had really been dealing with me about two things: approachability and demeanor. I have to say that those are a couple of factors that, especially as Christians, if we can’t be approachable, if we don’t have a demeanor that actually let’s people know that they’re welcome, then people are going to be turned off. If I had to express it, and I’m going to get into that a little bit later, that just turns people away and that’s not the way to win souls for Christ. So, I’m down there, and I wasn’t in any hurry, I’m sitting there at the gate that I’m supposed to be at, maybe an hour to an hour and a half to wait for my flight. I like to get there a little early. I’m drinking a cup of coffee, reading the newspaper, sports scores, you know, stuff like that. So anyway, there’s this lady, and she’s clearly from India, she sits next to me and starts asking me some questions about her connecting flight and her baggage and some different things... So, one of two things: I could have been like, “I don’t know! Go talk to them,” but I’m thinking about it, and God’s dealing with me about it, which is really, so, I’m looking at it, and there was a little bit of a language barrier, but not too severe; she understood English. So, I was looking at her itinerary and trying to get an understanding, well, “Okay, you’re going to be on a United flight...” and this and that and the other. So I said, “Well, there’s nobody up at the counter at the moment, so let’s wait, maybe fifteen minutes, and I’ll go up there with you.” So, we went up there, and to be honest, the lady at the counter really didn’t have great understanding, so, ultimately, I don’t really feel like I helped her a lot, nor... Now she had time, so it’s not like this was a total loss. I guess my point is, it was a matter of, what am I going to do when a stranger comes up to me, comes up to us and asks us for help with something maybe that we have no power over whatsoever? Now, I will say this, there’s times, I mean, I feel like, how would I have reacted to her, had that dealing of God not been in the prior weeks? I don’t know. I might have just been, “I don’t know. I can’t help you.” But I’ve got to say that there’ve been times when God has allowed me to help people, and I’m talking about especially on the road. I mean, I keep a set of jumper cables in my trunk, and there have been times where—I’m not talking about something where I have to drive crazy or swerve off the road and try to avoid an accident kind of thing—I’m talking about pull over, “Do you need help?” “Yes, I do.” “Okay, I’m going to pull up in front of you, we’ll see what we can do.” Or, somebody’s stuck in the snow; being able to help them. Or maybe somebody’s car is just completely broken down, and they need to get pushed off to the side of the road. I look at it like, I don’t say this to make it sound like we’re supposed to be superheroes; there’s plenty of opportunities. I also look at it like, I would like to think I’d be getting help if I’m in a difficult situation like that, if I’m stranded. I know good and well that I was on another trip and I understand that sometimes it might be people’s job, but sometimes people don’t have to do it. I actually had a couple of bags, I was carrying one, and I had another luggage bag, at Bradley Airport in Connecticut, they drive you to the Enterprise location to get your car, and then you basically get out, rent your car, and then take off. I remember I was so excited, that I just got out and started walking, and I got a fairly good distance from the truck, and the guy’s like, “Oh, hey, you left your bag here.” It was a big bag with lot of stuff, and it would have been a real pain in the neck if I had left that. So, there’s times when I feel like I’ve been on the receiving end of hospitality or kindness that’s shown from a stranger.

Now I don’t think that these kinds of experiences are just so earth-shattering that It’s going to make the news, or he’s going to be the superhero... That’s not what it’s like. It’s like, it does make life a little better—let me be a little kinder.

**Luke 17:11-19**      *And it came to pass, as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off: And they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go shew yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, And fell down on his*

*face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.*

So, that was the only that turned back to give praise unto God, was the stranger. I hope what is happening, because I know, and again, I want to ask this question—let me just back up a moment and just ask—How many feel like that the word stranger, or strange, has a little bit of a negative definition? I do too. Again, mentioning that, like, some of the ways that it's viewed, and, again, we do live in a society with thousands, millions, billions of people, there's plenty of strangers. I mean, we run into them every day, we come across them, we see them on TV, we read about them in the news... I think, unfortunately, what happens a lot of times is the extreme behavior is highlighted, you know, a serial killer, or something like that guy in Cleveland, Ohio, I don't remember his name—it's not important—but he held some women captive for years. You know, you think about something like that and it's just heartbreaking. It's more than just heartbreaking, it's actually repulsive. It's unbelievable that somebody could just, you know it's like that stuff like Hannibal Lecter, I mean, it's like, "What?" How has society gotten to this point? I mean, we know that the Bible says that iniquity shall abound and the love of many shall wax cold (Matthew 24:12).. So, again, strangers: There are going to be times when we run cross strangers who are in genuine need of help, that aren't people looking to do anybody any harm, that aren't dangerous, that aren't going to be any kind of a threat, where we're going to have to look at it like, "Okay." I think when God gives us those opportunities to help, we should be able to help. Again, I get back to the money issue, because that's not always going to be the case. Sometimes it is, and, again, like I mentioned about a couple of things earlier about people really helping out some others just this past week, and I look at that like, "Man! That's fantastic!" Those really do make a change for the better. I'm not saying that it's always about just that giving of something physical, but when you can give something spiritual...

Again, it's not like, and I mentioned this earlier, some kind of superhero, or we're just here to even give glory to ourselves, because this one time I helped a guy, he offered me money. I just jump-started this guy, the gut worked over at Abbott, and I just thought, "No. That's not what I'm about. I'm blessed. I'm just glad it worked. That's the main thing, honestly." That's something, when you're willing, and you are able, and it actually works—I mean, I don't want to put jumper cables on there and rrrrrrr-rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr, "Oh, that didn't work."

***Deuteronomy 10:17-19*** For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

There's a lot of verses in the Old Testament that talk about how the Israelites were strangers in Egypt. God kept them and God protected them. It does make me think differently, and hopefully it does us. I'm not here to try to convince or persuade "Come on, come on, you got it?" that's not the case. I know, looking up that word, it's in the Bible 193 times, which, to me, that clearly indicates that it's there for a reason; it's not just there by accident. It's there for our understanding. I guess I'd have to—I was thinking about this a little bit on my way over here this morning—this isn't like, "Oh, this is so groundbreaking!" or, "Nobody's ever..." If I'm not mistaken—and I don't remember if it was Pastor Wilson or Pastor Paine (for those of you who don't know, Pastor Paine is our bishop down in Virginia, and Pastor Wilson is down there as well), if somebody remembers, was there a sermon that was taught, "The Stranger Among Us?"—so, it's not a new concept at all. It's not like this is going to knock them out of the park, but, one thing I will say, we do have boundaries. That's another thing: I'm not saying that we have to be somebody's doormat or a pushover. I mean, we have to have protection. We have to

understand, and I believe that God's going to give us that discernment to understand when this is a good opportunity. Think about this—we just came through the Christmas season; I want to share this: even reading through some of the passages that talk about the birth of Christ, and how many times there were dreams, there were dreams telling the Wise Men, go back another way to your own country (Matthew 2:12). There was a dream that came to Joseph that said, take unto you Mary thy wife, because that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost (Matthew 1:20). It's not like God's not there to give that instruction and that understanding—sometimes at the last second, and that's not comfortable, but it does show that God is an on-time God. But I'll say this: There's times that we reach out to people—(Malcolm, would you come up here a minute?) hopefully, this drives a point home (I'm gong to reach out to shake your hand, but don't shake mine, okay?). “Hey, how you doing?” (reaches out to shake Malcolm's hand, but Malcolm doesn't respond, so Chris reaches up and smoothes his hair) You've got to play it off cool and everything. Yeah, I wasn't really... Sometimes you feel like you're hanging. Even last week—I won't go into too many details—but I went out to shake somebody's hand, and they're kind of looking around, so I walked over to somebody else. You know, you feel like a dummy a little bit. My point is, that sometimes you reach out to people, and you don't get that handshake back. Sometimes people don't reciprocate that hospitality or that charity, but what I'm going to say is, don't stop being friendly. Shake it off; it's not like that kind of thing where it didn't feel good, and sometimes it's just accidental, like they're real busy, or real distracted, or whatever the care may be, but don't stop being friendly with each other or with strangers because God will never leave us hanging.

This is going to be our last verse this morning:

**Hebrews 13:1-3** *Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.*

I look at it like, you know what? that lady at the airport, it doesn't matter whether, maybe she was an angel, I don't even really take it too far in thought. It's known by God whether she is or she isn't; it doesn't matter, because, what it comes down to is, the Bible says, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers...” We're talking about, again, I'm not talking about somebody that is threat or a danger to society or somebody that you know that God gives you a hunch that this person is going to try to rip you off; this person is going to try to drop you right now. We're not talking about that kind of, “Oh, sure, take whatever you want,” that's not what were talking about. We're talking about when people are in jeopardy, maybe they're in distress, maybe they broke down on the side of the road, maybe they're just like somebody at a coffee shop that looks bummed out—just give them a cheerful smile, you know, friendliness, waitresses, waiters, people that you don't know, but... I hate to see when people mistreat waitresses and waiters, because most of them do their job well. I mean, I've never been a waiter; I've worked in kitchens as like a dishwasher and stuff like that, and most people are pretty good, but when I see somebody like really railing on them, I think, “Are you really that small, that you have to take it out on a total stranger?” because that's what they are. There was a movie I saw several years ago and I actually watched it again not too long ago. It was kind of interesting, and a little bit different and it was called, “American History X.” Some have seen it; some may have not. It's a little on the harder side. I would say that it had to do with racial tensions, and what was interesting, though, is it didn't have anything to do with the old South, or the Ku Klux Klan—it had nothing to do with that. It was in California, so it was kind of a different setting. When you think back, racial—and I know that's a sensitive issue—but, when you think back, California was barely a state during the time of the Civil War—I think it became a state in 1850—but, either way, I didn't look this up, whether they were on the Union or the Confederacy, that's not really the point. What is the point is that during this movie, there's a kid, probably sixteen, seventeen years old, and he was very impressionable. He had an older brother that had become a skinhead, but had reformed, and really, it changed his life. So, what happened was, this kid was really conflicted, but, as the story goes, and it starts to wind down, he had a teacher who has asked

him to write an essay. I'm not going to get into all that, but I just want to say that the very last part of it stood out to me. All he said was, "Life is too short to be ticked off all the time." I got to thinking, and, you know what? that really stayed with me, because it was like, sometimes, when I think that, here's this young kid, and it's the kind of thing where it's like, again, getting back to demeanor, getting back to approachability, getting back to character am I portraying. I mean, am I walking around, looking like, "Oh, I missed that one." There's always a battles, and there's always something that comes up, and something else, and something else, and something else... What about those great victories that God has given us last year, the year before, going back to today, this year, and what God's promised us? I'm not saying it's one of the all time greatest movie quotes, but it stuck with me, and maybe if it doesn't hit you let it sink in for a minute.

Think about, again, what people are seeing when they see you. Sometimes we see ourselves, we look at ourselves in the mirror, and how are we doing around our family and friends? If we go to another level, how about our co-workers or fellow students? How about the complete strangers? Are we willing to go the extra mile? Reach out and shake somebody's hand? Sometimes get a miss? Forgive someone for the wrongs they've done or forgive ourselves for the wrongs we've done? Are we willing to try a little kindness? It starts with love. We've all seen strangers and we've all been strangers at one time or another. And again, I really appreciate that song. I mean, that ministers to me a lot, because that's something—I know we don't do it regularly. I would say that it was something that—not a big thing—and I'm closing; I'm closing. I know that I want to wrap up with the theme again: It Starts With love. I know that's something that, Parrish, I know you had asked Pastor Paine, I don't know if it was a couple or four years ago, but, and, again, for those of you that don't know, that's the bishop of our ministry, and a gut who's been faithful to God for many years—thank God for that—but he asked, "What is it you do when you prepare to teach and to preach?" and he just said, "It starts with love." That's life-changing if you'll let it. I look at it like, it's go to change me. It's going to change us for the better. There's no doubt about it; it starts with love.

I want to thank you for your time. God bless you.

