

Sermon Transcript from August 28th, 2016 Empire vs. Kingdom Pastor John Mark Comer, Bridgetown Church

Turn in your Bibles to Daniel 7. If you're just here for the first time, that's about three quarters of the way through the Bible after Ezekiel. That's kind of the major prophet right before and then Daniel 7. Over the summer, we've been in a two or three-month long conversation from the book of Daniel on becoming a creative minority. The basic idea is what we all know to be true. That over the last, I don't know, three, four or five decades in the west and in particular in America, the ground has kind of moved under our feet and we're now in a full on, post-Christian moment where the dominate value system of our host culture is often at odds with the way of Jesus, with everything that we believe and even how we live.

So, just a few hours ago, I was walking into church from my house and, I don't know, two blocks down the street, one of my neighbors had this – just to break the stereotype – late 90s Subaru station wagon with progressive bumper stickers all over the back. So, not a lot of those in the city. And this was a new one. Like, I don't know if it's old or new, but it was the first time for me. "Freedom is the distance between church and state."

And then you have Capital Hill on one side and the cross of Jesus on the other and Dwayne Johnson in the middle or whatever. But, I'm just thinking, "This is my neighbor." Like, literally a few houses down. And I'm thinking, "Man, this is how my neighborhood right now is thinking and feeling about the cross; about the central icon of the way of Jesus."

"Just get it out of the public square. Get it as far away as possible from our society."

And then, a few blocks later, I'm on 13th right by our office and there's some kind of a street fair and there's this lousy art right here. You've got to love that. It's like Swedish, happy Jesus riding a rhino – I think it's an evolution thing – with a Miller High Life, for those of you without 20/20. Like, okay? Who had that idea in the first place? But, I was just thinking, man, we're at the moment where the most sacred belief that we have, Jesus of Nazareth, is a joke in our culture. Like, people just laugh. "Oh, you're a follower of Jesus? Are you crazy? Are you a bigot? Are you uneducated? Have you just not been around very long?"

We're in this really fascinating cultural moment. So, the question is how do we be Christian in a post-Christian world? How do we follow Jesus in a world and in particular in a city like Portland that really wants little or nothing to do with Jesus? So, for that, we're reading through the book of Daniel, because it's a book all about living in exile. Now, the book of Daniel, as I said a few weeks ago, is split right down the middle. So, the first half is stories about life in exile, starting with Daniel as a teenage boy all the way up to Daniel at 70 or 80 years old. But here in Daniel 7:1, it's like the fulcrum point. The book shifts gears. The second half is all about life after exile. It's prophecy. It's a signpost over the horizon to the future of the people of God and really the future of the world as a whole.

Now, the second half of Daniel is tricky because it's written in a genre of literature called "apocalyptic" that we honestly have zero equivalent for in the modern world. So, as a modern reader, you come to a chapter like the one we're about to read and it's strange and esoteric and kind of bizarre and hard to make sense of. But, if you were an ancient Near eastern Babylonian or Hebrew, it would have made a lot more sense. Now, just before we jump in, for those of you that grew up in the kind of Left Behind prophecy chart, end of the world, Obama is the anti-Christ wing of the church and you still are in therapy over it – anybody else? Just me. Okay. Just me. For the other three of you, relax. I promise not to go there. Because, I would argue that when you turn prophecy into speculation about the "what ifs" of the future, tragically you miss out on all that it has to say about the here and now.

So, on that note, let's dive in with a lot of respect for the genre that we're about to read. Okay? There we go. Summer. "Fall's almost here." Shut up.

Daniel 7:1: **"In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon,"** – okay, pause. Notice right there that already we're out of chronological order. So, this is a flashback to the year 553 B.C. About a decade before the story of Daniel and the lions' den. So, about a decade earlier.

"Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying in bed. He

wrote down the substance of his dream."

Okay. So, here's a twist in the story. Before, if you were here a month or two ago, remember in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and Daniel interpreted it. But now, who has a dream? Daniel. And he'll actually need help in order to interpret it. Now, Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2 was about a statue – if you remember – in four parts, that was symbolic for four empires. Daniel's dream is about four beasts who are also symbolic for four empires. The two dreams, chapter 2 and chapter 7, run parallel. So, think about that in the back of your mind as we read through it.

Now, also, as we read it, I forewarn you – in particular if you're new to the Bible – it's pretty weird. But, remember: it's a dream. Okay, how many of you have weird dreams? Yes. And you're excited about that? Okay. Well done. Weird dreams. Better than Netflix. But, you're not alone. You're not the only one. The difference between your weird dream and Daniel's weird dream in this case, it's not because of a late night run for a glass of wine or Salt & Straw or whatever. It's because the dream was from the Spirit of God. Now, Daniel's dream has two parts. Let's read the first one. Look at Daniel 7:2.

"Daniel said: 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.

"The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it.

"And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'

"After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.

"After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

"While I was thinking about the ten horns, there before me..."

How many of you dream like this? You're like, "I wonder what that means."

"While I was thinking about the ten horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully."

How are we doing? Some of you are like, "This is why I don't read through the Bible with you all year long. Alright?"

Now, the first thing Daniel sees is "the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea."

Now, keep in mind, this was written in the ancient Near East. It's over a millennium before Christopher Columbus and the crossing of the Atlantic. It's a Bedouin culture. It's a land-locked, desert culture. So, this is deeply evocative imagery. In the ancient Near East, the sea was symbolic for chaos and anarchy and evil and all that's wrong with the world and all that is a threat to encroach upon what is good and beautiful and true. In fact, in Babylonian culture, the sea was deified as a dark, malevolent, spiritual being. And out of the sea come four beasts which are symbolic, we read later, for four empires. Now, notice they are not animals. They are animal-like. They are mutant, monster-like beings. The imagery here is designed to evoke terror and fear. This is like the ancient version of a horror film. Okay?

And, as I see it, the imagery operates on two levels. On one level, these four beasts are symbolic for four empires around the time of Daniel. There's some debate in academia. Most scholars identify the four empires as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. So, the first beast is like a lion with the wings of an eagle. That was stock imagery in the ancient world for Babylon. There were carvings of a lion with the wings of an eagle and,

interesting, the face of a man at the main entrance, the gate into the city of Babylon. Also at the palace of Nebuchadnezzar. So, this has Babylon written all over it.

The second beast is like a bear with three ribs in its mouth. So, the imagery there, the idea is it just ate, but it's still hungry. The Medo-Persian empire, which conquered Babylon, ate or conquered not only Babylon, but two other empires as well. Egypt and Lydia. But, it's still hungry. It's still thirsty. It's still out for blood. The third beast, we read, is like a leopard and it's like a bird. Meaning it's fast. The Greek empire, which conquered the Medo-Persian empire under Alexander the Great conquered not only the Medo-Persian empire, but most of the known world, as you know. From Europe all the way to India. And it did it fast. In a little over a decade. And, in the imagery here, it has four heads. When Alexander died, as most of you know, we think he was gay. Either way, he had no heir. And the empire was divided up into four parts based on his four top generals.

So, then you have the last beast, and it's crazy. So, Dr. Tim Mackie calls it "super beast." I love that. It's kind of cool. Super beast. And, for those of you into sci-fi – anybody else? Just me? Yeah? My people are here a little bit. All five of you. Nerd out. Anyway, this is the closest thing to sci-fi in the Bible. It's animal-like, but we read it has "large iron teeth."

So, it's some kind of a bio-mechanical, robotic terror. Most scholars think this is a nod to the Roman empire and the ten horns – we'll read more about that in a minute – are a nod to the line of the ten Roman emperors. So, on one level, this is symbolic for four flesh and blood empires in the ancient world. Babylon and the Medo-Persian empire which is conquered by the Greek empire which was conquered by the Roman empire. But, on another level, it's symbolic for all empires down through human history. From Babylon and Medo-Persia and Greece and Rome to Genghis Khan to the Ottoman empire to the British empire of the 19th century to Nazi Germany of the 20th to communist Russia of just a few decades ago. Empires that are beastly, that trample the poor, that devour those on the margins that are at war with the people of God. And that's often how prophecy works on more than one level. In particular, prophecy in the Old Testament. It's like there's a signpost forward over the horizon to a literal event. And, at the same time, it's a symbolic pattern.

It's like the prophecy is saying, "Hey, this is going to happen in a few decades or in a few hundred years."

And, actually, this happens all the time. Beasts, empires, come up out of the sea, out of chaos and evil, that are empowered by a dark, malevolent, spiritual reality that the New Testament goes on to call "The Satan." Now, if you're reading this and you're thinking, "Okay. Dude, this is not a dream. This is a nightmare." Okay, yes. You are right. But, it gets better. Let's read part two. Look at Daniel 7:9.

"As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days..." – that's another name for God – **"...took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.**

"Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn..." – remember that little horn? That'd be kind of lame, by the way, to be called the little horn. But, anyway.

"...because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts [empires] had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)"

So, in the second half of the dream, Daniel sees not to the earth, but into heaven itself, into the throne room of the King of the universe; God himself. It's the only place that I know of in the Bible where God is likened to an old man. Think of the white hair. The imagery here is not that He's elderly or decrepit or passé. We live in an ageist culture that looks down on age rather than looks up to age. The imagery here is that He's ancient and He's wise and He's unlike any other in the universe. And there's fire. In fact, there's a river of fire. It's all this rich, evocative, apocalyptic imagery. And there's a sea of people spread out before the throne of God. Hundreds of millions of men and women and children. And then we read that iconic line. "The court was seated and the books were opened."

This is the imagery of judgment. It's tapping into a longstanding motif in the Bible, in the Old Testament and in the New, of judgment day. Of a day coming in the future, on the horizon, where God will judge the world and forever set up the Kingdom of God. And then we read this. Look at Daniel 7:13. This next paragraph is over the top important.

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one kind of like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven."

So, Daniel sees a little bit deeper into the throne room of God and he sees "one like a son of man." Or, that Aramaic phrase can be translated "a human one" or "a human-like one" that is "coming on the clouds of heaven."

Now, "clouds" – and stay with me for a minute – all through the Old Testament are kind of stock Hebrew verbiage for an appearing of God. So, think of the cloud on top of Mount Sinai. That was actually God on top of Mount Sinai. Or the cloud over the Tabernacle. That was actually God over the Tabernacle. Or the cloud out in front of Israel in the desert. And we regularly read about God "on the clouds."

So, for example, Psalm 68: **"Sing praise to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who..."** – what? – **"...rides on the clouds."**

Psalm 104: **"He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind."**

Nahum 1: **"Yahweh rides on a swift cloud and the clouds..."** – I love that line – **"...are the dust of his feet."**

So, get this. This figure is kind of like a human being, but at the same time he's an appearing of God. Does that ring a bell or two? Yes, for you? Yes. "Jesus!"

For you, as a follower of Jesus, absolutely. Then we read this: **"He..."** – this one like a son of man who's also an appearing of God – **"...approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence."**

And we think this is like an enthronement motif.

"He was given authority, glory and sovereign power;" – meaning he was made king of the world – **"all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion..."** – his rule, his reign – **"...is an everlasting [rule and reign] that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."**

Unlike Rome or Greece or the Medo-Persian empire of Daniel's time or the Babylonian empire before that, his kingdom – not empire – will never be destroyed. It said he will rule and reign forever. Now, who is this prophecy about? What's the answer to nine out of ten questions? Jesus. Absolutely. It's not a trick question. If you read the four Gospels, you know that Jesus' favorite name for Himself was what? The Son of Man. He would say that on a regular basis. That was kind of His self-identity; His moniker. Now, where's He getting that from? Well, He's getting that from right here. Daniel 7. In fact, this chapter's one of the most important chapters in all of the Bible. So, some chapters are more important than others. So, there's a list of about 10 chapters in the Old Testament that you really need to wrap your head around to make sense of the story.

So, Genesis 1, Genesis 12 and 15. Exodus 19. Leviticus 19. And, Daniel 7 is right near the top of that list. Top five for sure. It shaped Jesus' self-identity. In fact, if you know this story in all four of the Gospels, Jesus, the night before the cross, is on trial in front of Caiaphas the High Priest in the Sanhedrin. That was kind of like the Jewish ruling, religious government of the day. And they asked Him, "Hey, are you the Messiah? Are the rumors true? Are you claiming? We don't believe in you. But, are you claiming that you're the Messiah?"

And Jesus not only said yes, He quoted from Daniel 7 right here and He said, essentially, "I'm the one like a Son of Man. I'm this figure of prophecy from hundreds of years ago. This kind of human-like one who's also an appearing of God. I'm humanity and divinity in the same place."

And that, of course, to a first century religious court was blasphemy. So, the next day, Jesus was put to death. But, all that to say, this is a prophecy about Jesus. Now, watch what happens. Let's just read it really fast to the end.

Daniel 7:15: **"I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my**

mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this."

"Hey, I'm lost. I interpret dreams for a living and I'm lost."

"So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: 'The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High...' – who's that? Us – "...will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever."

So, the four empires and one kingdom.

"Then I wanted to know the meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws..." – see, even Daniel's into sci-fi. Like, he's into it.

And he starts to ask all these questions, and feel free to read it later on your own time. Skip down to Daniel 7:23.

"He gave me this explanation: 'The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it.'"

We think that's a nod to the Roman empire.

"The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom.'"

There was a line of ten Roman emperors starting with Julius Caesar.

"After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High [God] and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws.'"

That's the worship of the temple in Jerusalem.

"The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time.'"

We think that's just an apocalyptic, ancient Near Eastern way of saying, "For a season of time that is set even by God. There's a beginning to it, there's a middle and there's an end."

And he's saying, "There's a season coming of violence and an upheaval of society and persecution of the people of God.

"But the court will sit," – we're back to the imagery of judgment – "and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to..." – who? – "...the holy people of the Most High.'"

Yeah. You and me. That's a mind-bending line.

"His kingdom [Jesus' kingdom] will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.'"

Meaning everybody from the least to the greatest will bow the knee to King Jesus in the Kingdom of God. And then Daniel, like end of journal entry or autobiography, the end of memoir:

"This is the end of the matter. I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself."

So good. "How did you sleep last night, Daniel?"

"You don't want to know."

Now, here's a question: why is Daniel, at the end of chapter 7, "deeply troubled?" I mean, yeah, the first part of the dream is a nightmare. It's scary and all of that. It's designed to kind of evoke terror. But, that's just the first part. The second half is great. It's about this coming Son of Man, this human and divine-like figure who will set up the Kingdom of

God on earth and then share it with all the people of God and all the other empires and all the other beasts will go the way of the earth and the king and all of the people of God will rule and will reign forever. That sounds like Gospel. That sounds like good news.

Why is Daniel all upset? Well, we don't know exactly. But the odds are it's because Daniel wants this all to happen right now. How many of you hear about something great and you're like, "Sounds fantastic? Let's do it."

"When?"

"Now."

Like, he wants the Kingdom of God to come right now. But, the reality is – and he's just starting to wake up to this – it's still a long way off. It will come, but it will come way down the line in the future. In the meantime, empires, plural, will rise and fall. Not just Babylon and not just the Medo-Persian empire. But then the Greek empire and then the Roman empire and then more after that. There will be seasons, time, a times and half a time or upheaval and unrest and danger and violence and persecution and war on the people of God. That, Daniel, is what's coming down the pipe.

So, this is a dream – or depending on how you read it, a nightmare – about living in the shadow of empire. Now, I chose to teach Daniel 7. I don't have time to teach the entire second half of the book before the end of summer. But, I chose Daniel 7 because not only is empire a major theme of Daniel – we've already read about it earlier in the book – but it's a major theme of the Bible as a whole. Starting with Pharaoh and Egypt and the exodus, then King Solomon and Israel and the monarch. Then the Babylonian empire and the exile. Then the Roman empire all through kind of as the backdrop to the New Testament. So, this idea of empire, whether you like it or not, is something that, as a follower of Jesus, you and I need to wrestle with. So, that's kind of the agenda for tonight.

So, to start off, what do I mean by "empire?" Here, if you're taking notes, are four markers of empire from a scholar by the name of John Dominic Crossan. For those of you who know who that is, don't judge me. Alright? I read widely. And, don't worry, I read him as a historian and literary critic, and that's all. Alright? Some of you are like, "What are you saying?"

Don't worry about it. First off, one is military. An empire not only has a military, it has the best military in the world, at least most of the time. Better soldiers, better weapons, better funding, better strategy. And it has trust. A key aspect of empire of it's people is trust in empire. It has trust in its military for its safety and security.

Two, economic. An empire is an engine that is driving the world economy forward and has trust in the markets for its peace and its prosperity. Three, political. An empire has a way of organizing the power structures that run society, and its emperor or, in today's language, its president or PM, play more than a celebrity role, almost a pseudo-godlike role in particular in a secular society like the one we live in. And it has trust not only in its leader and its government, but in its form of government. It really makes the point that our form of government and our leader is the best ever.

Then finally, four, is ideology. An empire has a narrative, a story it tells, about the good life. This is more true now than ever before because of the digital age and mass access to all sorts of information. Half a century ago after World War II, Winston Churchill, in the wake of Nazi Germany and then communist Russia, he said this:

"The empires of the future will be empires of the mind."

What he meant by that is that the empires of the future – and we're now living in that future – won't conquer by military violence as much as they will seduce and hypnotize and allure by ideology. The internet has far more power than any army ever has. Now, the thing about an empire is that in order to rule over a large area and more than one people group, an empire has to control and conform. Control. It has to get you to do its bidding. Pay your taxes, drive the speed limit, or at least, you know, five or ten above. No more. Obey the law, volunteer at your local school, vote if it's a democracy, join the military. Like, it has to control you and it has to conform you. It has to get you to fit into the image. Not only to behave the way the

empire wants you to, but to think and feel the way the empire wants you to.

And if you refuse to be controlled or conformed, you get in trouble. If you don't believe me – hopefully you're not on Facebook, because it is a waste of time. But, if you are and you don't believe me, just, as a social experiment, whether you believe it or not, just post something on Facebook – because that's where most of the conservatives are – about non-violence. Just copy/paste Jesus from Matthew 5 or 6. Maybe throw in a little Romans 12 and 13 and just a dabble of 1 Peter 3. Just drip it in. Just Scripture. Just copy/paste Scripture and then maybe a one liner like, "I don't think Jesus would apply for a concealed carry permit."

Just something like that. You know what I mean? And if you disagree, read the Bible. Okay? And watch what happens. Within a few minutes, watch the sharks come out to feed. Or, on the other side, the progressives are all on Instagram. So, post something on Twitter or Instagram about abortion as modern day genocide and how the right to life for an innocent child with no voice, it always, ten out of ten times, trumps the right to choice. And just watch your nice, progressive friends and family eat you alive.

My point is that if you deviate from the norm, from the ideology, from the thinking, from the feeling, from the behavior of the empire that you call home, you come under fire. This is how entire nations turn evil. So, I've just been thinking about how crazy the Nazi Germany thing, World War II, that was not a very long time ago. I love that our world is just so – we have so much amnesia. We're like, "Oh, that was forever ago. We've evolved."

It was like our grandparents, you guys. Or some of you it's like great grandparents. Well, okay. You're younger than I am. But, it was not that long ago at all. I mean, how does that happen? Does an entire nation just wake up one day and decide to exterminate all Jewish men and women and children? No. It happens slowly but surely over time. Just this and World War I and the economy in the tank and German insecurity and nationalism and bad, actually progressive, theology and nationalism and then Hitler. The rise of Hitler and he's, we assume, inspired or empowered by a dark, malevolent spiritual being. Like all sorts of beasts, he comes up out of the sea.

And there's a tipping point in the early 1930s where something happens in German society that we're still just reeling from. Because, the reality is that we are all formed by empire. We're all formed by the culture that we grow up in and we live in and we eat and sleep and breath and work in and call home. We'll talk more about formation this coming fall. We have this series that starts in October that I'm just literally counting the days until. For now, know that human beings, by nature, the way we're made by God, we're dynamic, not static. Meaning we're all becoming somebody. Every day, you wake up and you're becoming somebody. You're not the same person you were yesterday and you'll be a different person tomorrow. For better or for worse. We're all being formed. The odds are we're being deeply formed by the culture that we live in. That's why it's so important that we recognize empire for what it is because we want to be formed more than anything by the Kingdom of God.

So, really fast – actually, not that fast at all. Here, if you're taking note, are four thoughts on empire, because I would argue that's what Daniel 7 is all about. First off is this: America is an empire. If that makes you nervous, just stay with me for a few minutes. Let's run America through that grid. The four things from a few minutes ago. One, military. We have the largest military in the world. You all know that. The amount of money that we spend on national defense is insane. Economic. We have more wealth than any empire ever in history. Americans make up, now, like 4% of the world's population, but 22% of the world's wealth. That's actually down 50% at its height. 1969, we were 40% of the global economy, of the GDP.

In the Cold War, the primary argument for Western-style democracy over communism was our wealth. "Hey, look at how well we live."

There's this iconic story about a Western politician who goes over to Russia and, in a public square, sets up a mock American house with a living room and a kitchen and a toaster and a dishwasher and a black and white TV, and nobody believed him. Nobody. Like, "What, are you a king? Are you a queen?"

Nobody believed him. That was the pitch for democracy. "Look at all the money that we have."

Political. I know it's an election year. But still, think about the percentage of your morning

news feed that is political. Think about all the hope that people put into a candidate or a party. It is borderline Messianic, in particular this last election and really the one before that as well. Politics has become the default religion of the secular west. And then ideology. And this is what I think is really interesting. So, America started out as an idea that became an ideology. Have a look at this. Most of you remember this from grade school. The opening line of the Declaration of Independence.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident," – there's our deist heritage – "that all men are created equal," – there's our Christian heritage – "that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are..." – what? – "...Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

So, there it is. The kind of prototype version of the American dream. Every one of you has a right to chase after a better life. Now, for those of you that are cynical and know your history, you know that by "all men" what the Declaration actually means is "all white males of British ancestors."

So, that's a whole other teaching I don't have time for. But, over the years, the American dream has evolved. And, I mean, you can see even there the seeds were all planted for the hyper-individualism that we're living into now, for the hyper-consumerism that we're living into, even for the drift away from God. So, what is the new American dream? Because we all know it's changed from that over the last quarter of a millennia. What is the new ideology? Our friend, Mark Sayers – do you remember Mark? The Australian who was here a few months ago? The kind of intellectual savant and you're lost half the time, but the other time you're like, "This is amazing?"

He identifies seven widely held beliefs in Western culture. This is from his book, "Disappearing Church," that you all need to read. So, I'm just going to go through this really fast. Email me if you want a copy later or whatever. Actually, don't email me. A lot of you will do that. Email my assistant. How's that?

One: the highest good is individual freedom, happiness, self-definition and self-expression. Two: traditions, religious, received wisdom, regulations and social ties that restrict individual freedom, happiness, self-definition and self-expression must be reshaped, deconstructed or destroyed. Three: the world will inevitably improve as the scope of individual freedom grows. Technology, in particular the internet, will motor this progress toward utopia. Four: the primary social ethic is tolerance of everyone's self-defined quest for individual freedom and self-expression. Any deviation from this ethic of tolerance is dangerous and must not be tolerated. Therefore, social justice is less about economic or class inequality and more about issues of equality relating to individual identity, self-expression and personal autonomy. In particular, the sexuality and the bathroom issue and stuff like that right now.

Five: humans are inherently good. Six: large scale structures and institutions – like the church – are suspicious at best and evil at worst. And finally, seven: forms of external authority – God, the Bible, the Judeo-Christian ethic, the Church – are rejected and personal authenticity is lauded. Be true to who? Yourself. Not to Jesus, not to the Bible, not to your family, not to your tradition, not to your culture. No. Be true to yourself.

How good is that, by the way? I read that and I'm like, "Yeah. That's my neighborhood. That's the internet. That's the world I live in. That's my city that I walk to work in every single day. And Sayers points out that this ideology is really interesting. It's held by widely disparate groups. It's held kind of across the spectrum from liberal to conservative. For millions of people in America and really all over the West, these beliefs form the dominant framework for navigating life. Sayers writes this:

"These beliefs have not so much been argued as assumed. They are not enforced. Rather, they are imbibed. We do not receive them as intellectual propaganda to be obeyed. Instead, they are communicated to us in an almost subconscious level through the high priests of advertising and the techno profits of Silicon Valley. This new cultural mood becomes all the more powerful as the good is reduced to mere individual happiness."

That's, now, like the pursuit of our nation.

"We can no longer see beyond ourselves to learn from history or be concerned about the future. The result is an amnesia about everything except the immediate, the instant, the now and the me. The future is not left to God, but rather a kind of implicit, fuzzy faith that things will simply move to get better. 'Somehow, society will get better. My life will get

better."

This is ideology at a spiritual and at a religious level in our secular society and it's everywhere that you and I turn. All that to say, America is an empire. We are the global military superpower of the day. We are the engine driving the world economy. By our own definition, we are "the greatest nation on earth."

Now, why is this so important to wrap your head around? You're like, "This is Portland. We want to secede from the union and become Portlandia or Cascadia or whatever. We don't really even care."

Here's why it's important: it's important to draw a clear line of demarcation between the empire of America and the Kingdom of God because the myth of America as a Christian nation is dangerous because it blinds us to the beastly side of America. There's a lot that's great about America. I'll talk about that in a minute. But, there is a beastly side. It blinds us to things like racial injustice, things like globalization, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer for that shirt for \$7.99 at Target. Things like military violence. It blinds us to what the New Testament writers called "the world."

And we forget that in the fight for the life and health and vitality of the Church, empire is usually our enemy and rarely our friend. That said, secondly if you're taking notes, empires are a mixed bag of good and bad. So, please don't misunderstand me here. Please listen. There is a lot, as we all know, to love about our country. We read the Bible and it's easy to come off with a negative view of empire and a negative view of Babylon or Greece or Rome because the Bible, for the most part, was written from underneath the boot of the empire. Even Daniel, who was the number two man in Babylon and then later in the Medo-Persian empire. He was still a Hebrew. He was still dragged off as a teenage kid into exile. The Bible would sound very different if it was written by a Babylonian or a Greek or a Roman.

The thing is, there's a lot of good and bad in every empire. Some empires have more good than others. America has its fair share of issues. I think most of us would all agree it's a thousand times better than, say, Nazi Germany or Stalin's Russia or North Korea. I'm pretty sure, other than Dennis Rodman, we would all agree. In fact, America, just like Babylon, has done a lot of good in the world. I mean, Babylon was the zenith of human civilization at the time. The Roman empire was incredible as long as you were Roman. It was amazing. And I even think about that tension, even in the book of Daniel itself. You have the dream in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which is way more positive about empire. And then you have the dream in chapter 7, Daniel's dream, that is way more negative on empire. It all depends on your relationship to empire. People's view of America depends. Are you American? Are you Israeli? Are you British? Or, are you Iranian or Syrian or Russian or something else? It all depends on your vantage point.

And, as citizens of both America – here's what I'm driving to – and the Kingdom of God. Right? So, we have this dual citizenship. Our job is to celebrate all that is good, beautiful and true in America and its way of life. To thank God for it, to thank our nation for it, our government for it, to pray for those in authority. While, at the same time, living as a witness to the even better reality of the Kingdom of God. A reality that it's not only better but is, on a regular basis, more and more so at odds with America and its way of life. Because, the thing is – three, if you're taking notes – empires come and go. All empires.

In Daniel's dream, one beast is conquered by another is conquered by another is conquered by another and on down the list. This needs to be said because our political system is based on – and we've talked about this before – what sociologists call "the myth of progress." In the West, it looks and feels like this idea that we're kind of evolving toward this Western, secular, progressive, godless utopia. Our political system is based on this myth. Nobody would get elected without it. Our business market is based on this myth. In particular, technology. Nobody would download that new app or buy that new thing if it was not for the myth of progress. "Hey, newer equals better. Newer equals better. Newer equals better."

We don't even stop and question technology anymore. Advertising is based on it. All empires hold out the promise of a utopian future whether it's a democratic empire or a capitalist empire or a Marxist empire or a Portlandian empire or whatever. Everybody says, "Hey, we're marching forward toward our godless utopia."

And while progress in science and medicine and government often makes the world a much better place – I'm really glad that I did not live 200 years ago or 1,000 years ago. Like, we have running water in my house and electricity and a toilet and a hospital down the street and I don't die from the flu or something like that. So, in a lot of ways, empire

has made the world an a lot better place. But, it all depends on what your values are. If your values are safety and security, yeah, we're doing a lot better in the West. Not around the world, but in the West. But, if your values are love, family, community, peace, meaning, purpose, relationships, justice, then really are we that much better off than we were 1,000 years ago? 2,000 years ago? Thank you. 5,000 years ago? Like, are we really evolving at all or is it far more cyclical than, in the West, we ever want to think about?

So, contra the myth of progress – what Hillary wants you to believe, what Trump wants you to believe, what Silicon Valley wants you to believe, what that magazine advertisement all wants you to believe – the fact is, as the people of God, and really just as students of history, we believe that all empires, at some point inevitably hit a zenith and then lapse into decline. Empires are usually defined by pride and arrogance. But, they all fall. Rome. Is it around anymore? Nope. They have great pasta and that's about all that's left. Greece? The country's in bankruptcy. There was a Colin Farrell movie about a decade ago. I never saw it. I heard it was lousy.

The Medo-Persian empire. All that's left is Iran, and that's a mess. Babylon is literally gone. There's literally no city left, no ethnic group left, no nation state left. It's literally gone. Even America. We're only a few hundred years in and, depending on how cynical you are, it looks like we're already in decline, that the glory days of the post-World War II America are over or on hiatus or we'll see in the next few decades. And God is sovereign over the rise and fall of empires. Some of you are thinking, "Did you just say the word 'sovereign?'" if you know me. Like, I rarely play with that language because that word, sovereign, means all sorts of things to all sorts of people.

So, to clarify, when I say that God is sovereign, I don't mean that God is in control of every detail of life. But, I do believe, based on the story of the Bible, that God's hand is on human history working with and, at times, against human and spiritual characters in the story to slowly, but surely, bring about the Kingdom of God. Now, when I say that all empires come, go, rise, fall, God's sovereign, that does – please listen. Please listen carefully right now.

That does not mean, "Hey, just throw your hands up. It's all going to Hell. Relax. Watch Netflix and worship Jesus a lot at church."

That's not at all what I'm saying. I love this quote from Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks. Remember, he was the one that made popular the historian Arnold Toynbee's language of a creative minority. And this is out of that exact same lecture. It's a long quote, but I just feel like it's so good that I want to read it. So, just, thinking caps on. Yeah? Okay. School starts tomorrow, so just getting you ready if you're in grade school. You're not. It's 7 P.M. Sorry. If you're here, talk to your parents after, okay? Because, they are irresponsible.

First off, this is really good, "The West has already gone far down the road of abandoning the Judeo-Christian principles of the sanctity of life and the sacred covenant of marriage. Instead, it places its faith in a series of institutions, none of which can bear the weight of moral guidance. Science, technology, the state, the market and evolutionary biology. Science tells us what is, not what ought to be. Technology gives us power but cannot tell us how to use that power. The liberal-democratic state, as a matter of principle, does not make moral judgments. The market gives us choices, but does not tell us which choices to make. Evolutionary biology tells us why we have certain desires, but not which desires we should seek to satisfy and which not. It does not explain the unique human ability to make second order evaluations."

Meaning, to do things you don't want to do or vice versa.

"The results lie all around us. The collapse of marriage, the fracturing of the family, the fraying of the social bond, the partisanship of politics at a time when national interest demands something larger, the loss of trust in public institutions, the build up of debt whose burdens will fall on future generations and the failure of a shared morality to lift us out of the morass of individualism, hedonism, consumerism and relativism. We know these things, yet we seem collectively powerless to move beyond them. We have reached the stage described by Livy..." – that's a historian – "...in his description of ancient Rome where we can bear neither our vices nor their cure."

How haunting is that last line? We can bear neither our vices nor their cure. So, the great question of our time is can the decline of culture in America and the West be arrested? Or no, is it just inevitable? There's no way around it? The creative minority answer is: "Yes, it can."

And in fact, it's our job as the people of God to do it. In the language of the prophet Jeremiah that we read a few weeks ago, to seek the peace and prosperity of the city through what our friend, Gerry Breshears on the other side of the river calls "redemptive participation."

And, on that note, here's my fourth thought on empire: in the end, God will judge all the empires of the world and set up His Kingdom on earth. In the meantime, our job is to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have called you."

End quote from Jeremiah. So, to end, I just want to chat for a minute or two. How do we do that? How do we seek the peace and the prosperity of our city? There's a book that I read not long ago that I just loved. It's from this kind of not well known Anabaptist professor from the late 90s. I think it's out of print. But, it's worth it for the title alone. The title is "Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City."

It's a great read on cultural engagement for the church in a post-Christian kind of moment. And he has these three metaphors of how you and I, as the people of God, relate to our host culture as artists, as citizens and as philosophers. So first, as artists. Artists – and I know some of you are in the room tonight – do two things. They critique the bad in society. You see that in a secular, nihilistic artist like Banksy. But, the best artists do more than critique the bad, they also call out the good. And we need to be artists. And when I say that, I know "art," I think, is a broad term. I don't just mean painting or sculpture or music. In a way, all work is artistic. Painting, yes, and raising children and teaching second grade and running a business and teaching the Bible. It's all creative. And good artists help people to imagine a better future. They catalyze the mind's eye to a new reality. They help people see not only what is, although that's a huge part of art to kind of unveil to – that's what the word "apocalyptic" means, by the way. An unveiling.

To kind of help people see the beastly reality of the world. But, at the same time, they help people see not only what is, but what could be and to dream of and imagine a better future. They lead with beauty. So, first is artist. Secondly is citizens. We need to be, as I said before, we have dual citizenship. We need to be good citizens of Portland, Oregon, and of the Kingdom of God. We need to tie our peace to Portland's peace. To pray, in the language of Jeremiah, for the peace of our city. And not only to pray for it, but to work. To sweat and bleed for our city or for wherever your live and call home.

That word "peace" in Hebrew, as most of you know, is "shalom." It means way more than that thin, kind of shallow, English word "peace." It's way more than like "not at war." It means harmony and delight and life flourishing and life as God intended it. We are to pray and to work for a vision of Portland that is as God intended it, that is more in line with God's vision of human flourishing. This city should be a better place because you're in it or whatever you call home should be a better place because you follow Jesus there.

Then third, as philosophers. That word "philosopher," as most of you know, "philo" is Greek for "love." It just means a lover of wisdom. We need philosophers more now than ever, because our culture is desperately lacking wisdom. We have so many people – and this is a ton of my friends who don't follow Jesus, and some who do – who are educated, smart, successful in the public sphere, but in the private sphere are a wreck. Don't know how to parent a three-year-old. Don't know how to stay in a marriage. Don't know how to be in community. Don't know how to manage money or sexual drive or any of that stuff. We're all over the map. We need wisdom more than ever.

We need philosophers to discern what is good and beautiful and true and to bring the wisdom of God to bear on the world. We need philosophers in business, those of you that work in the marketplace, to bring the wisdom of God to bear on a world driven by capitalism and consumerism. And we need philosophers to work inside of capitalism and consumerism to chart a path forward, not just to make more money, but to make a better world. We need philosophers in technology thinking through not just what technology can do for us, but what technology is doing to us. We need philosophers in parenting. Oh my gosh. Like, most of us know this. As millennials, our parenting game is weak. Most of us grew up in broken homes and the ripple effect of generational sin is just catastrophic for so many children. And, if you don't believe me, just start to hang out with children more often.

We need philosophers in parenting, men and women who discern how to parent well, how to coax a child into maturity, how to help and not hurt a child, a little boy or a little girl, to thrive in God's world. My point is that we need philosophers in every aspect of society.

So, artists, citizens and philosophers. This is what it looks like to be a creative minority in our city. Now, to wrap up. I don't know about you. Maybe this is just me. But, with all the racial tension over the last few months and some of the gut wrenching stuff we're dealing with right now across America and then, on top of that, with the summer series on a creative minority, I just have been thinking a lot about Martin Luther King Jr. And just wishing we had another one. Another King to lead us and to guide us right now through racial tension and through a whole host of other things. You know, he was an artist. His "I have a dream" speech was a masterpiece. It was poetry and symbol and prophecy and Gospel and music. It was a catalyst to help America envision a world marked by racial justice.

He was a citizen of America, he was a philosopher, a lover of wisdom and a man who has had all sorts of problems and all sorts of issues, but was a lover of wisdom. And I just want to end with this quote. It's from his letter from Birmingham Jail. If you've not read it, it's well worth the time. He writes this:

"Human progress never rolls on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God. And without this work, time itself becomes an ally with forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do what is right."

I just love that. Contra the myth of progress, his point is, "No, that's not inevitable. That progress, that a better world comes through the tireless..." – I love that line – "...efforts of men and women willing to be coworkers with God."

Did you know that's what you are? You're a coworker with God. When you wake up tomorrow morning and you go to class or your part-time job or your career or whatever's on the docket, you're a coworker with God.

"Who do you work with?"

"God."

That's pretty cool. And right now, God is teaching you and training you to become the kind of man or woman who can steward power well without becoming a beast, without becoming a little horn, without becoming a warped, ugly, nasty version of what God had in mind. He's teaching you and training you to become the kind of person who one day, behind Jesus, can rule and can reign over the universe. One day at a time. And our job, as we co-work with God as artists, as citizens, as philosophers in Portland, Oregon, is to wake up tomorrow morning and, in King's language, to use time creatively. To know that every hour, every minute, every second is a precious commodity and that life is short. It doesn't feel that way when you're young. It is short. And the time is now for redemptive participation, to get on about all that Jesus is on about in our day and in our age, to play your part, small or massive, major, minor, known or not, obscure, to play your part, to play your part well in a creative minority.

Let's stand and pray.