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Keynote Address at the 54th National Prayer Breakfast

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Well, thank you, thank you Mr. President, First Lady, King Abdullah of Jordan, Norm [Coleman], distinguished guests. Please join me in praying that I don't say something we'll all regret.

That was for the FCC.

If you're wondering what I'm doing here, at a prayer breakfast, well so am I. I'm certainly not here as a man of the cloth, unless that cloth is -- is leather. I'm certainly not here because I'm a rock star -- which leaves only one possible explanation: I've got a messianic complex. It's true. And anyone who knows me, it's hardly a revelation.

Well, I'm the first to admit that there's something unnatural, something even unseemly about rock stars mounting the pulpit and preaching at presidents -- and disappearing to their villas in the South of France. Talk about a fish out of water. It was weird enough to have Jesse Helms come to a rock show. This is *really* weird.

Now, one of the things I love about this country is the separation of Church and State and although I have to say in inviting me here both Church and State have been separated from something else completely: their -- their mind.

Mr. President, are you sure about this? It's very humbling, and I will try to keep my homily brief. But be warned: I am Irish.



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I'd like to talk about the -- the laws of man, here in this city, where those laws are written. I'd like to talk about higher laws. It would be great to assume that once there's the other, that the laws of man serve these higher laws, but, of course, they don't always. I presume that, in a way, is why you're all here. I presume the reason for this gathering is that all of us are here -- Muslims, Jews, Christians -- are all searching our souls for how to better serve our family, our community, our nation, our God. And some of us are not very good examples, despite what Norm [Coleman] says.

I am certainly searching, and that, I suppose, is what led me here. Yes, it is odd, having a rock star at the breakfast. But maybe it's odder for me than for you, because, you see, I've avoided religious people most of my life. Maybe it's something to do with having a father who was a Protestant and a mother who was a Catholic in a country where the line between the two was, quite literally, often a battle line; where the line between Church and State was, at the very least, a little blurry and hard to see.

I -- I -- I remember how my mother would bring us to chapel on Sundays and my father used to wait outside. One of the things that I picked up from my father and my mother was the sense that religion often gets in the way of God; for me, at least, it got in the way -- seeing what religious people, in the name of God, did to my native land. And even in this country, seeing God's second-hand car salesmen on their TV cable channels offering indulgences for cash. In fact, all over the world -- seeing the self-righteous "roll down like a mighty stream," from certain corners of the religious establishment. I must confess, I changed the channel. I wanted my MTV.

So, even though I was a believer, and -- and perhaps because I was a believer, I was cynical -- not about God, but about God's politics. (There you are, Jim.)

In 1997, a couple of eccentric septuagenarian Christians -- British, as it happens -- went and ruined my shtick, my reproachfulness. They did it by describing the Millennium, the year 2000, as a Jubilee year; described this year as an opportunity to cancel the chronic debts of the world's poorest people. They had the audacity to renew the Lord's call and were joined by Pope John Paul II, who, from Irish half-Catholic's point of view, may have had a little more of a direct line to the Almighty. But they got together to declare the Year of Jubilee.

It's a "Jubilee." Why "Jubilee?" What was this year of Jubilee, this year of our Lord's favor? I'd -- I'd always read the Scriptures, actually, even the obscure stuff. There it was in Leviticus 25:35: "If your brother becomes poor," the Scriptures say, "and cannot maintain himself, you shall maintain him. You shall not lend him your money at interest, not give him your food for profit."



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This is such an important idea, Jubilee, that this is how Jesus begins his ministry. Jesus is a young man; he's met with the rabbis; he's impressed everybody; people are talking. The elders say, he's a clever guy, this Jesus, but -- you know -- he hasn't done much public speaking.

When he does, his first words are from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he says, "because He has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor." And Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord's favor, the year of Jubilee. I think that's Luke 4[:18]. What he was really talking about was an era of grace -- and we're still in it.

So fast-forward 2,000 years. That same thought, grace, is now incarnate in a movement of all kinds of people. It wasn't a bless-me club. It wasn't a holy huddle. These religious guys were willing to get out in the streets, get their boots dirty, wave the placards, follow their convictions with actions, making it really hard for people like me to keep our distance -- ruining my shtick. I almost started to like these church people.

But then my cynicism got another helping hand. It was a -- It was Colin Powell, a five-star general, called the greatest W.M.D. [Weapon of Mass Destruction] of them all: a tiny little virus called A.I.D.S. And the religious community, in large part, missed it. And the ones that didn't miss it could only see it as divine retribution for bad behavior -- even on children, even if the fastest growing group of HIV infections were married, faithful women.

Ah, there they go. Judgmentalism is back, I thought to myself. But in truth, I was wrong again. The Church was slow but the Church got busy on this the leprosy of our age.

Love was on the move.

Mercy was on the move.

God was on the move.

Moving people of all kinds to work with others they had never met, never would have cared to meet. They had conservative church groups hanging out with spokesmen from the gay community, all singing off the same hymn sheet on AIDS. See, miracles do happen. And we had hip-hop stars and country stars.

This is what happens when God gets on the move: crazy, crazy stuff happens.

Popes were seen wearing sunglasses! Jesse Helms had a ghetto blaster now! Evidence of the Spirit moving. It was really -- it was breathtaking. It literally stopped the world in its tracks.



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When churches start demonstrating on debt, governments listened -- and acted. When churches started organizing, petitioning, and even that most unholy of acts today, God forbid, *lobbying* on AIDS and global health, governments listened -- and acted. I'm here today in all humility to say: you changed minds; you changed policy; and you changed the world. So, thank you.

Check Judaism. Check Islam. Check pretty much anyone. I mean, God may well be with us in our mansions on the hill. I hope so. He may -- may well be with us in all manner of controversial stuff. Maybe, maybe not. But the one thing we can all agree -- all faiths, all ideologies -- is that God is with the vulnerable and poor.

God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.

If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and the speaking of wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday and the Lord will continually guide you and satisfy your desire even in scorched places.¹

It's not a coincidence that in the Scriptures, poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times. It's not an accident. That's a lot of air time. You know, the only time Jesus Christ is judgmental is on the subject of the poor. "As you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me." [I] believe that's Matthew 25:40.

(See, I've been doing my homework.)

As I say, good news to the poor.

Here's some good news for you, Mr. President. After 9-11, we were told America would have no time for the world's poor. We were told America would be taken up with its own problems of safety. And it's true these are dangerous times, but America has not drawn the blinds and double-locked the doors.

In fact, you have doubled aid to Africa. You have tripled funding for the global health -- for global health. And Mr. President, your emergency plan for AIDS relief and support of the Global Fund -- you and Congress -- has put 700,000 people onto life-saving anti-retroviral drugs and provided eight million bed nets to protect children from malaria.

Outstanding human achievements. Counterintuitive, I think you'll admit, but -- but -- but historic. You should be very, very proud.



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But here's the bad news. There's so much more to do. There is a gigantic chasm between the scale of the emergency and the scale of the response.

And finally, getting to higher levels, higher callings: This is not about charity in the end, is it? It's about justice. The good news yet to come. I just want to repeat that: This is not about charity, it's about justice. And that's too bad. Because we're good at charity. Americans, Irish people, are good at charity. We like to give, and we give a lot, even those who can't afford it.

But justice is a higher standard. Africa makes a fool of our idea of justice; it makes a farce of our idea of equality. It mocks our pieties; it doubts our concern, and it questions our commitment. Six and a half thousand Africans are still dying every day of preventable, treatable disease, for lack of drugs we can buy at any drug store. This is not about charity: This is about Justice and Equality.

Because there's no way we can look at what's happening in Africa and, if we're honest, conclude that deep down, we would let it happen anywhere else -- if we really accepted that Africans are equal to us.

I say that humbled in the company of a man with an African father.

Look what happened in South East Asia with the Tsunami. 150,000 lives lost to the misnomer of all misnomers, "mother nature". Well, in Africa, 150,000 lives are lost every month -- a tsunami every month. And it's a completely avoidable catastrophe.

It's annoying but justice and equality are mates, aren't they? Justice always wants to hang out with equality. And equality is a real pain in the ass. Seriously.

I mean you think of these Jewish sheep-herders going to meet with the Pharaoh, mud on their shoes, and the Pharaoh goes, "Equal? Equal?" And they say, "Yeah, that's what, that's what it says here in the Book, here. We're all made in the image of God, sir."

Eventually the Pharaoh says, "Look, I can accept that. I mean, I can accept the Jews -- but not the blacks. I mean, not the women. Not the gays. Not the Irish. No way."

So on we go with the journey of equality.

On we go in the pursuit of justice.

We hear that call in the ONE Campaign, a growing movement of more than two million Americans -- five million by the next election, I promise you -- united in the belief that where you live should no longer determine whether you live.



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We hear that call even more powerfully today, and we mourn the loss of Coretta Scott King -- mother of a movement for equality, one that changed the world but is only really getting started, 'cause these issues are as alive as they ever were; they just change shape and they cross the seas.

Preventing the poorest of the poor from selling their products while we sing the virtues of the free market, that's not charity: That's a justice issue. Holding children to ransom for the debts of their grandparents, that's not charity: That's a justice issue. Withholding life-saving medicines out of deference to the Office of Patents, well that's not charity. To me, that's a justice issue.

And while the law is what we say it is, God is not silent on the subject. That's why I say there's laws of the land and then there's a higher standard. And we can hire experts to write them so they benefit us, these laws, so that they say it's okay to protect our agriculture but it's not okay for African farmers to protect their agriculture, to earn a living. As the laws of man are written, that's what they say. But God will not accept that. Mine won't. I don't -- will yours?

I close this morning on very thin -- thin ice, probably. This is a dangerous idea I've put on the table, here: my God versus your God, their God versus our God, versus no God. It's very easy, in these times, to see religion as a force for division rather than unity. And this is a town -- Washington -- that knows something of division.

But the reason I'm here, and the reason I keep coming back to Washington, is because this is a town that is proving it can come together on behalf of what the Scriptures call "the least of these." It's not a Republican idea. It's not a Democratic idea. It's not even, with all due respect, an American idea; nor it is unique to any one faith.

"Do unto others as you would have them do to you."² Jesus says that.

*Righteousness is this: that one should give away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and to the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and the beggars and for the emancipation of the captives.*³

The Qur'an says that.

*Thus sayeth the Lord: Bring the homeless poor into the house, when you see the naked, cover him, then your light will break out -- then your light will be like the dawn and your recovery will be speedily and spring forth; then the Lord will be your rear guard.*⁴

The Jewish Scripture says that. It's Isaiah 58 again.



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It's a powerful incentive: "The Lord will watch your back." Sounds like a good deal to me, especially right now. (Right? The Lord will watch your back. [turning to President Bush] You like that. Okay.)

Alright.

A number of years ago, I met a wise man who changed my life -- in countless ways, big and small. I was always seeking the Lord's blessing. I - I'd be saying, "Look, I've got a new song...Would you look out [for it]. I have a family; I'm going away on tour -- please look after them. I have this crazy idea. Could I have a blessing on it."

And this wise man asked me to stop. He said, "Stop asking God to bless what you're doing. Get involved in what God is doing -- because it's already blessed. Well, let's get involved in what God is doing. God, as I say, is always with the poor. That's what God is doing. That's what He's calling us to do.

I was amazed when I first got to this country and I learned how much some churchgoers tithe: up to ten percent of the family budget. I mean -- I -- I -- How does that compare with the federal budget, the budget for the entire American family? How much of that goes to the poorest people in the world? Well, it's less than one percent of the federal budget.

Mr. President, Congress, people of faith, people of America: I want to suggest to you today that you see the flow of effective foreign assistance as tithing; which, to be truly meaningful, will mean an additional one percent of the federal budget tithed to the poor.

And what is that one percent that we're asking for in the ONE campaign? It's not merely a number on a balance reader pulled out of the air. One percent is the girl in Africa who gets to go to school, thanks to you. One percent is the AIDS patient who gets her medicine, thanks to you. One percent is the African entrepreneur who can start a small family business, thanks to you. One percent is not redecorating presidential palaces. One percent must not be -- or don't give it -- money down a rat hole. This one percent is digging waterholes to provide clean water...like I saw with Bill Frist, there, in -- Where was it? -- Uganda.

Okay, that's what we're after, folks.

One percent is a new partnership with Africa, not paternalism towards Africa; a new partnership with Africa, where increased assistance flows toward improved governance and initiatives with proven track records and away from the boondoggles and white elephants that we've seen before.

America gives less than one percent now. We're asking for an extra one percent to change the world, to transform millions of lives, but not just that -- and I say this to the military men now -- not just transform hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of communities, but transform the way they see us, which might be smart in these dangerous times.



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One percent is national security. One percent is enlightened economic self-interest, and a better safer world rolled into one. Sounds to me that in this town of deals and compromises, one percent is the best bargain around.

Thank you very much.

¹Isaiah 58:9-11

²Luke 6:30

³2.177

⁴Isaiah 58:7-8