Becoming that Golden City on a Hill

Rehoboam's bronze shields, the village that lets us drop them, and the God who turns bronze to gold

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, May 2, 2021
PASSAGES	1 Kings 14:25-28; Matthew 5:14-16; James 5:16; Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 18:9-14
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:58:11 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

When Egypt carried off Solomon's golden shields, Rehoboam had bronze ones made that looked the same from a distance and went on strutting. Fear and shame tempt us to the same pretend religion. A church becomes a golden city on a hill when it makes confession, listening, face-to-face honesty and loving correction normal – and Jesus can turn a bronze heart back into gold.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Jesus called his people a city on a hill – a beacon where people in the dark find shelter and hope. Pretense puts a basket over that light.
- Rehoboam's bronze shields are a warning against pretend religion: holding out an image of ourselves we want others to embrace.
- Fear and shame drive us to hide – that if anyone really knew us we would have no friends. Pretending feels safe but leaves us isolated and desperate.
- Coming out of hiding is impossible alone. It takes a village that values confession and repentance, listening over judging, speaking face to face, and telling the naked emperor the truth.
- Bronze religion never admits a mistake. It has to be judgmental, because a facade only survives if everyone around it agrees to it.

- All of us live somewhere between bronze and gold, and move along that line from day to day.
- God turned Zacchaeus, Peter, James and Saul from bronze to gold. “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

▶ 0:59:05

Geno began by honoring Abigail Cogdell, stepping back after several years as a worship leader. In his view, her leadership deepened when “she quit worrying so much about what we thought of her and spent a lot of time worrying what Jesus thought about her.” He prayed over her new season and announced that Dr. Steve Hawthorne would teach on the ascension of Jesus over the next two Sundays.

A city on a hill

▶ 1:02:29

One of Geno’s great hopes for Hope Chapel, as part of the church in Austin – “we are not the church, we’re part of the church in Austin” – is that it would be what Jesus described: a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden, a beacon where people in the dark are drawn to find shelter, hope and joy. There are ways we shine the light of Jesus, and ways we put a basket over it. This message was about clearing some of those obstacles.

▶ 1:04:02

The text is a warning, tucked into four verses: a warning against pretending, against hiding who we really are behind “an image or a facade that we want others to see and embrace.” Many in the room might not need it, he allowed – “but let me talk to the four or five that may struggle with this.”

Gold shields, bronze shields

▶ 1:05:04

> "In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. He took away the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house. He took away everything. He also took away all the shields of gold that Solomon had made, and King Rehoboam made in their place shields of bronze, and committed them to the hands of the officers of the guard, who kept the door of the king's house. And as often as the king went into the house of the Lord, the guard carried them and brought them back to the guardroom."
>
> 1 KINGS 14:25–28 ↗

▶ 1:06:10

Rehoboam "was an unmitigated disaster as a leader." He blew up the kingdom his grandfather David and father Solomon had spent two lifetimes building. Refusing the people's plea for relief from Solomon's building projects (1 Kings 12), he set off a long civil war between Israel and Judah that weakened both. Then Shishak marched north from Egypt and, by extra-biblical accounts, forced tribute from more than 150 cities.

▶ 1:07:22

At Solomon's height so much gold poured into Jerusalem that, some scholars think, he struggled to store it, so he made ceremonial gold shields for guards who probably lined his path to the temple. Geno's nearest comparison was the Queen's Guard at Buckingham Palace – red coats, "Q-tip hats," rigid marching. "You think, oh, it's pomp and circumstance... that's not true. Those are real British soldiers and they can kill you." Spectacle like that brings glory to a monarchy. Five years after Solomon died, it was gone.

▶ 1:09:51

What caught Geno's attention was Rehoboam's response. He did not drop the ceremony. He said to himself, in effect, "I'm just going to fake it." Bronze shields, shiny and gold-colored, that looked about the same from a distance – and he kept on strutting "like a peacock king with pretend opulence."

▶ 1:10:39

> *"It's the pretense that I think is dangerous to the body of Christ... I do not want to be a pretender, ever."*

He wanted to be a WYSIWYG person: what you see is what you get.

Why we pretend

▶ 1:11:22

Two reasons, Geno said: fear and shame. “Everything’s okay, I’m fine” is the standard answer to “how are you?” We are afraid that if anyone knew us as we know ourselves we would have no friends, maybe be pushed out of our families; and we are ashamed of our thoughts, our past, our choices – even recent ones. So we march behind bronze shields, looking as if everything is fine, “when really we are isolated and desperate for help.”

▶ 1:12:40

It can happen gradually or overnight. One day we make a poor choice and begin to hide, first from ourselves, then from friends and family. Or we get busy, look up, and find the passion we once had for God’s honor is gone. “What do we do then? Do we go on, no longer golden, but with a bronze religious life?” Fear and shame breed self-doubt and self-loathing, and we start to believe we deserve to be judged and shamed.

Join the village

▶ 1:14:04

“And now for the good news.” There is real freedom in setting fear and shame aside and coming out of hiding, and the authenticity that returns matters. How? “We have to make a decision to no longer remain isolated, but to join the village.”

▶ 1:14:45

A faith community can encourage the dropping of bronze shields and tend toward authenticity – “in fact it’s impossible to do it by yourself.” We do not have to be “a village of bronze pretenders.” Four marks of a healthy golden village:

1. We value confession and repentance

▶ 1:15:54

Not as last-ditch efforts, but as “part and parcel of what it means to belong to Jesus and to belong to one another” – for husbands and wives, friends and roommates, families. “Confession says what I did was wrong, I’m sorry. Repentance says I’m going to do my best not to do that again,” sometimes with restitution.

▶ 1:17:52

We do it with our mouths, and we look to our leaders to model it. Geno had nothing to confess that morning, he said, but he regularly confesses to his wife and to several friends in the room who know what he is afraid of and ashamed of. Anyone could ask PJ, or his sister Melinda. "That should make you really uncomfortable, but it's so good. Let's all be uncomfortable together."

2. We value listening over judging

▶ 1:19:32

"I'd rather hear you tell me what's going on in your life than to pick you up off the ground when it crushes you." We may not be able to promise never to judge, but we can promise to do our best. After all, someone has to hear all those confessions – "not me, don't you dare line up at my door." We can listen, pray for one another, and declare one another forgiven.

3. We go to one another face to face

▶ 1:20:12

We do not talk to someone about someone else. Geno praised the church here: when a rumor about someone came up in a staff meeting, not one staff member had heard it, "because we don't gossip at Hope Chapel." "Don't hurt yourself patting yourself on the back," but keep doing it. If you have a problem with a brother or sister, go one-on-one and make it right.

4. We tell our naked emperor friends

▶ 1:21:45

"With great gentleness, in healthy golden villages we tell our naked emperor friends if their wardrobe needs a serious upgrade" – his favorite line of the sermon. The emperor was sure his invisible clothes were real until a child said otherwise. Dear friends do each other the service of saying, "Don't you think those words were a little harsh?" or "You might be on the wrong side of that issue."

▶ 1:22:30

A clear sign of a golden village is that most people have given others permission to speak hard things into their lives. Geno has, and the congregation gives him consistent feedback because it wants its pastor to walk in integrity. "I've learned to understand that as love." Some years ago he said "we err" and received three emails about the pronunciation.

Bronze villages

▶ 1:24:32

In a bronze village no one admits a mistake; it is a sign of weakness. Bronze religion walks in pride, backbiting and gossip, prizes those who put others down and backs those who grasp for control. “Everyone is naked and cannot admit it.”

▶ 1:25:11

Geno’s theory: all of us live somewhere on a line between bronze and gold. No one is perfectly golden, no one perfectly bronze, and we move along it – “more golden on days and more bronze on other days.”

▶ 1:25:40

Bronze religion is hypocrisy, and it has to be judgmental and self-righteous, because a facade only survives if everyone agrees to it. Dissenters must be put down or put out. Rehoboam’s guards knew the shields were bronze; so did his retinue and the men who made them. “You better not speak – ‘hey king, they’re not golden’ – I’m sure your head is going to end up in a bronze bucket.” So bronze religion turns on people who follow God authentically, because they get in the way.

What Jesus said

▶ 1:27:31

> “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”
>
> MATTHEW 7:1–5 ↗

▶ 1:28:38

The bronze religionist has a log in his eye and refuses to see his own sin and lack of integrity, judging others by a standard he never applies to himself. Golden religion says, “I’ve got some stuff to work on before I work on you.” Bronze religion injures people when they are down – “they deserve it.” The golden religion of Jesus says, “Let me help you up, for I too am a sinner.”

▶ 1:29:18

> "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt… 'The tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.'"
>
> LUKE 18:9–14 ↗

▶ 1:30:34

When Geno sees that attitude, he said, it makes him sad – starting with when he sees it in himself. The temptation to pretend and not confess is very real for him; he is self-critical enough that admitting he did something wrong is "really hard."

Bronze into gold

▶ 1:31:08

"But this I know for sure: our God, the one that we worship and serve in the person of Jesus Christ, can turn bronze religion into gold." He can give a heart full of fear and shame the courage to say, "I was wrong about this. Will you hear me and pray for me?" And then, in Geno's experience, "the heavens are no longer bronze," and when he prays he senses the Spirit with him and Jesus listening, where before he had been in hiding.

▶ 1:33:02

He was not saying Hope was full of bronze religionists, but setting a direction: that the body of Christ in Austin would become winsome to people far from Christ – "a place that people look and say, man, can I have a little bit of what you've got?"

▶ 1:33:26

He sees it in Zacchaeus, who repented of his theft and welcomed Jesus home (Luke 19:1–10); in Peter, who denied Jesus three times and wept bitterly, then was restored after the resurrection – "that's bronze to golden right there"; in the one healed man out of ten who came back to worship (Luke 17:15–16).

▶ 1:34:02

He sees it in James, who with his brothers mocked Jesus before the cross (John 7:3–5) and afterward led the church in Jerusalem, calling himself "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." And in Saul of Tarsus, struck blind on the Damascus road, led by the hand, and made the apostle Paul (Acts 9:1–19). "Our God is that powerful."

This week: examine, then confess

▶ 1:35:56

Geno asked for a little self-examination – "if you do too much of it, do it just a little bit" – asking God where you are not being true with someone. God is gentle and generous; he will show you. Write it in a journal or record it on your phone. In short, "ask God where your religion is bronze."

▶ 1:37:01

Then go to someone whose spirituality you trust, confess, and let them pray with you. If you are part of Hope and do not know anyone, email Geno and he will send a name – "but if I take the time to find someone, you better go." "This one little thing that I'm suggesting will revolutionize our fellowship." It brings humility, and God gives grace to the humble.

▶ 1:38:04

> "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."
>
> JAMES 5:16 ↗

"I know you think I make stuff up all the time… but there it is, clear as day." Can we commit to the practices that make for golden religion? "I think we can."

▶ 1:39:29

His prayer: Jesus gave his life for people far from him, "and it seems to me that the least we can do is to walk before you and before one another in honesty and humility and grace" – purposely building a community where people can "come and be who we are, and then become who you desire for us to become."

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Matthew 5:14–16
- 1 Kings 14:25–28
- 1 Kings 12:1–16
- Matthew 7:1–5
- Luke 18:9–14
- Luke 19:1–10
- Luke 17:15–16
- John 7:3–5
- James 1:1
- Acts 9:1–19
- James 4:6
- James 5:16

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Geno named fear and shame as the reasons we reach for bronze shields. Which of the two pulls harder on you, and what does your “I’m fine” usually hide?
2. What makes confession feel so risky, and what would help it feel normal in your friendships, marriage or Hope Group?
3. Who has permission to tell you when you are the naked emperor? If no one does, who could you give it to?
4. Geno said bronze religion has to be judgmental to keep its facade intact. Where have you seen that – in a church, a family, or yourself?
5. Geno asked everyone to ask God where their religion is bronze, then confess it to someone they trust. Who will you talk to this week, and when?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt preached this message at Hope Chapel, where he leads the staff and introduced the coming teaching by Dr. Steve Hawthorne. He told the congregation that he regularly confesses his sins to his wife, PJ, and to a few trusted friends in the church, that his sister Melinda is part of the faith community, and that he welcomes the feedback members give him as an act of love.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bP8e8sP_aYA&t=3491s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.