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SCOPE HIV MESSAGES OF HOPE LESSON SERIES

A Sermon Guide for Church Leaders

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World Relief
7 East Baltimore Street
Baltimore, MD 21202 USA
Tel: +1 (443) 451-1900

www.worldrelief.org

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SERMON 1 – HIV TESTING: COUPLES TESTING TOGETHER FOR HIV IS IMPORTANT FOR A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

Introduction

As you may be aware, pastors and church leaders in this community are working together to address the HIV problem. Though we have been talking about HIV in Malawi for a long time, there is still a long way to completely deal with HIV. It remains a problem in our communities, in our churches, so we need to talk about it even here in our church.

Many men and boys delay or avoid HIV testing. In most cases, they are afraid that once they know their status HIV will keep them from providing for their families; they may be seen as weak, sick, or sinful; or because they are afraid that their partners may leave them and worse still wait until they feel sick to seek HIV testing.

This lesson helps faith leaders themselves and their congregants with HIV testing in general and the importance of couples testing together for HIV in particular. Testing for HIV is the only way to know if you have HIV. Many people do not have any symptoms and can live for many years without knowing they have the virus. Getting tested for HIV is quick, easy, painless, confidential and almost always free. Test for HIV regularly to keep yourself and your partners healthy.

Scriptures for sermon: Ephesians 4:2, Ephesians 5:28-29; Amos 3:3

Marriage is a relationship that was instituted by God. It is a partnership for life. As Paul writes in **Ephesians 5: 31**,

“for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

Since husband and wife are one, it is important that they work together at all times in a marriage context. Should one of the two be HIV positive, there is no reason why the other should not know, because they are one. Hiding HIV status from your spouse is wrong: your spouse and you are one body, so if you are hiding something, then you are as good as hiding something from yourself.

Is this possible to hide something from yourself? If you cannot hide anything from yourself, then there is no need to hide anything from your spouse.

As believers, we cannot successfully address the issue of HIV among men without talking about HIV testing. By virtue of being one body with their wives, married men ought to go for HIV testing with their wives.

About Couples Testing Together.

Testing together is a good health strategy for married couples or those planning to get married. This facilitates communication and disclosure of HIV status. It also supports linkage to HIV medical care and/or other appropriate services.

Couples testing together is particularly important because it:

- Reduces the burden of sharing one’s HIV-positive status by ensuring provider-assisted mutual disclosure;
- Creates an opportunity for couples to discuss, establish, or revise sexual agreements for their relationship;
- Allows couples to prepare a risk-reduction plan based on the HIV status of both partners;
- Provides a built-in support system, which may aid in linking persons living with HIV to essential care and treatment services, which is important for discordant couples (i.e., one partner is HIV-positive and the other is HIV-negative), for whom antiretroviral therapy (ART) may significantly reduce the risk of transmission and
- Early diagnosis of HIV infection and linkage to care enables persons with HIV to start treatment sooner, which leads to better health outcomes and longer, healthier lives.

As we observe, testing together as couples have many advantages and should be encouraged. Even when results are difficult to handle, we need to practice what God teaches us in his word. If we love one another as married couples, we need to “be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love (**Ephesians 4:2**).

As couples, you agreed to be together for life when we got married, and you need to make the same decision on how to know your HIV status. Two cannot walk together unless they have agreed to do so (**Amos 3:3**). Make a decision, agree to walk together to that clinic, health center or get those self-testing kits from a provider and do it.

SERMON 2 – STARTING TREATMENT: START ART RIGHT AWAY IF YOU TEST POSITIVE FOR HIV

Introduction

As most of you might be aware, our community has a project whose focus is on HIV. It is important that we talk about this as a church because we are affected in one way or another. Today we will talk about the importance of starting ARVs as soon as possible.

It is very important that all of us in church, especially men, should know our HIV status. For those that are positive, start **antiretroviral therapy (ART)** immediately. Going for a test is therefore very important.

Why ARTs?

As you all know, there is no cure for HIV. However, some medicines can help to suppress the impact of HIV.

What do ARTs do?

- Suppress the HIV virus
- Restore the immune system
- Treat the complicating illnesses
- Minimize the risk of drug/medicine resistance
- Improve the quality of life and clinical outcomes
- Decrease the chance of transmission to another person.

Scriptures for sermon: 2 Corinthians 6:2; Romans 13:11, Proverbs 4:6; Proverbs 29:18

Let us start our lesson by looking at what the word of God says about using the opportunities that we have. In **2 Corinthians 6:2**, we read,

“For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”

As we should say, opportunities are offered which might never again recur. The verse does not mean that that was the last chance for them to hear God’s word and do something about it. God is longsuffering, and he will give his children more openings for them to hear his word and commit to him. However, sometimes such an opportunity made be the last chance. For each church and nation, for each soul, there is a golden present that may never again recur. For that reason, the Apostle Paul emphasizes that now is the time; today is the day of salvation.

What is the next step after testing positive for HIV?

Testing positive for HIV often leaves a person overwhelmed with questions and concerns. It is important to remember that HIV is a manageable disease that can be treated with HIV medicines.

The first step after testing positive is to see a health care provider, even if you do not feel sick. People with HIV work closely with their health care providers to decide when to start HIV medicines and what HIV medicines to take.

The use of HIV medicines to treat HIV infection is called **ART**. People on ART take a combination of HIV medicines. ART prevents HIV from multiplying and reduces the amount of HIV in the body. ART cannot cure HIV, but it helps people with HIV live longer, healthier lives and reduces the risk of **HIV transmission**.

When should I start antiretroviral treatment?

It is recommended that people diagnosed with HIV start antiretroviral treatment straight away. The sooner you start treatment, the sooner you can benefit from it. Starting treatment as soon as possible protects your immune system from damage and gives you the best chance of staying strong and healthy in the future.

Early and effective treatment can help you live a normal life. It can also lower the chances of passing the virus to someone else.

Just as we read, today is the day of your salvation when you hear God's word. Today is the best time to start ART. The sooner you start ART, the better. That is true even if you feel good.

In **Romans 13: 11**, the Bible says;

"¹¹And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."

The time for salvation is near. We are being warned to understand the present time, to wake up from sleep and be ready.

When HIV positive, know that the time to live a long healthy life is here. Understand the time. There is ARV for treatment. Your ticket to a long healthy life, even when you have HIV, depends on how soon you start the treatment.

Many people, including men and boys, may have concerns about starting treatment

I know most of you have concerns about starting ART treatment. I understand your concerns, and in some ways, we from the church have contributed to that. As your leaders, I want you to know that

- Every HIV-positive congregant must take antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). Your life matters! Start taking ARVs today. Live a long life!
- Do not be discouraged by distance; go to the nearest health facility and start ARVs. Live a healthy life.
- Seeking treatment is not a sign of weakness. Rather, it is a courageous act necessary to care for and protect their loved ones. Going for treatment as early as possible shows that you care for others. You are practicing what God's word says in Philippians 2: you are considering others better than yourself.
- As a church or as pastors and church leaders, we will not judge you for being HIV positive. You should not see your condition as something they should be ashamed of or a punishment from God. It is not a punishment from God, as others say.

I know the importance of starting treatment right away, and I encourage any one of us who is HIV-positive to take antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). Should you have any concerns, please talk to me and any of our leaders.

SERMON 3 – ART ADHERENCE: CONTINUE TAKING ARVS, EVEN AFTER YOU ARE PRAYED FOR

Introduction

John 10:10 is a familiar scripture passage to most of us as believers. Jesus Christ came that we may have abundant life. This shows that Jesus cares for us as his children. He is concerned when we are sick and not well. He wants us to live a good life.

As you know, our local church is part of a project that is focused on addressing issues affecting us and our communities because of HIV. It is a problem in our communities, in our churches, so we need to talk about it even here in our church.

Many people in general, men, and boys in particular, face many barriers to obtaining HIV treatment. One such barrier that affects many people, especially those from churches, is in HIV treatment adherence. Some men have been told to stop taking their medication because they have attended prayer meetings and prayed for. Today we will talk about why it is important to ***continue taking ARVs, even after you are prayed for.***

Scriptures for sermon: 1 Timothy 5:23, Galatians 6:9, Ezekiel 33:6

God's miracles occur in different ways at different times for different people

Prayer is indeed very important and should be done. Much as we believe that God can miraculously heal people of different diseases, including HIV. It is God who heals. As pastors and church leaders, we can pray, but it is God who heals. In some cases, healing does not happen as we expect. For Example, Paul in **2 Corinthians 12:7-9** had a thorn in the flesh that gave him a problem. He prayed three times that God should take it away, but He did not. God responded that "his grace was sufficient for him." Paul prayed but did not get the response he was expecting from God.

In 2 Kings 5:1-15, there is another interesting story about Naaman. This story centers on some important 'big' people – Naaman, a great army commander, the King of Aram and the King of Israel. Naaman expected God's Prophet Elisha to cure him miraculously. However, Elisha does not provide the miraculous cure Naaman expects. Rather Naaman has to humble himself and accept simple and practical healing in which he must participate.

ART is God's miraculous provision, following the prayers of many for God to help doctors find a way to treat HIV.

What should we do then;

- Remember that God's miracles occur in different ways for different people. We have prayed for God to help doctors find a way to treat HIV infection.
- Know that ART is God's miraculous provision, following the prayers of many for God to help doctors find a way to treat HIV. The discovery of ART has removed the death sentence, which was formerly associated with HIV and AIDS.
- Men and boys who are HIV positive and on ART should continue with the treatment even when they are prayed for because as we have seen in the two Bible stories, not everyone

who is prayed for may receive the cure they are looking for. God, in his sovereignty, decides how and when to heal or cure.

- It is important to persevere with ART, even when people feel better. Even when those on ART are feeling better, we should not stop taking the medication. ART is a treatment, not a cure. People living with HIV need to keep taking ART medication, even if they are not feeling sick.
- Those of us knowing or suspecting that we have HIV must take full responsibility not to pass it on to others. Those who do not have HIV must take full responsibility for not getting it.

Some key verse to share

1 TIMOTHY 5:23	23 Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.	Paul advises Timothy, his disciple, to use the alternative available. ART is a good example
GALATIANS 6:9	9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.	Taking and continuing with ART is a good thing. We should not get tired of taking the medication even if we feel better.
EZEKIEL 33:6	6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood.'	We need to watch one another and blow the trumpet to warn each other. If you know someone on ART and have stopped because they have been prayed for or are feeling better, let us not be quiet. Let us say something and encourage one another. Otherwise, God will hold us accountable

As we finish the message, let us remind ourselves of ART adherence

What is it?

It is our ability to take all medications as prescribed, the right type of drugs, the right dosage at the right time and in the right way

ART adherence is very important to successful treatment.

The goal of ART is to reduce the amount of virus in the body, ideally to “undetectable” levels—meaning that the level of virus in a person’s body has fallen so low that standard blood tests cannot detect it.

Benefits of ART adherence

ART adherence makes it more likely that your viral load will be reduced to undetectable levels. Having an undetectable viral load:

- Allows the immune system to recover and become stronger.
- Puts you at a very low risk of becoming ill because of HIV.
- Reduces your risk of developing some other serious illnesses.
- Reduces the risk that HIV will become resistant to the anti-HIV drugs you are taking.

- Reduces the risk of passing on HIV. When you have an undetectable viral load, you may not pass on the virus through sexual contact.

What to do when you experience side effects

Just as in many types of medicines we take, some people on ART may experience side effects. If that happens, do not stop the medication but quickly seek help from a doctor or a clinic.

ARV adherence protects you and those you love and reduces the risk of HIV transmission

In Ephesians 5:25, the word of God says,

“²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Taking ARTs reduces the risk of transmitting HIV to your partners. When Men that are HIV positive take ARVs and continue to do so they demonstrate the love they have for their wives.”

Listen to the advice of others

As Christians, we need to heed the advice of others who know something that we do not. All of us, including those living with HIV, need to take advice and guidance from those with helpful information, including doctors, other health workers from the hospital, pastors etc.

The word of God from the book of Proverbs has a lot of helpful guidance that we need to note. For example;

Proverbs 2:11,

“¹¹Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.”

Proverbs 4:6;

“⁶Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you.”

As pastors and church leaders, we will ACT...

- with the courage to promote adherence to ART treatment
- to continue to encourage ART treatment alongside prayer
- to encourage men to go for testing and treatment and help them to continue with their treatment
- to promote healthy, positive living for body, mind and spirit

SERMON 4 – HIV TESTING: CHILDREN CAN GET HIV, TOO. LET US ASSIST OUR CHILDREN AND THOSE WE TAKE CARE OF TO BE TESTED

Introduction

As we continue with our messages on HIV, today we will talk about children. Children are important to all of us. We need to know that children, like everyone in the family, can get HIV. So as we talk about HIV testing, children should not be left out.

Scriptures for sermon: Mark 10:13 – 16; Deuteronomy 6: 6 – 7; Proverbs 22:6; Ephesians 6:4

Let us consider what is in **Mark 10:13- 16**,

“People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.”

As we see from these verses, Jesus Christ puts a very high value on children. He wants children to come to him. They have a place in his kingdom. As followers of Jesus Christ, we need to follow the example of our master. We need to give them the value they deserve. We need to support and take care of them. Provide for their needs: physical, social, mental and even economic.

We should talk to them about God’s word and commands as written in **Deuteronomy 6:6-7**,

“⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

As parents and guardians, we need to teach the word of God using every opportunity and time that we have available, especially when they are still very young. The writer of **Proverbs 22:6** says;

“⁶ Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.”

When we teach our children important issues while they are still young, they will not depart from such teachings.

Ephesians 6:4

“⁴Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

Our engagement with children should not only be limited to the spiritual aspects of their lives. We need to talk about other issues, including HIV and HIV testing. Children can have HIV too, and they need to know their status as early as possible.

Let me remind you how HIV can be transmitted to children:

- From an HIV-infected mother during pregnancy, delivery, or breastfeeding
- From transfusion of HIV contaminated blood or blood products
- Use of non-sterile equipment in health care facilities
- Use of non-sterile equipment by traditional healers (surgeries, male and female circumcision, scarification)
- Sexual abuse
- Injection drugs

HIV testing for children

Access to HIV testing in children, especially those over 18 months of age, is poor in most parts of our country. This creates a problem for the start and scale-up of treatment. As we decide to go for HIV testing, we need to consider children, especially if one or both parents are HIV positive. Screening children for HIV provides the best opportunities for diagnosing HIV infections in children at the earliest stages.

If we suspect something about the health of our children, taking them to a health facility so that they can be checked and tested for other illnesses, including HIV, would be the best thing to do. That shows how much we care for our children.

SERMON 5 – STARTING TREATMENT: ARVS ARE GOOD FOR YOU

Introduction

In our last Message of Hope, we talked about starting ART treatment as soon as you know you are HIV positive. I hope we all remember why it is important. HIV-positive men, women and children will live relatively long and healthy lives if they start ARV treatment as soon as they know their positive status. I, therefore, encourage you that you may still have not started that let us not waste our time. The time to start is now, today and not later.

Today we will talk about why ARVs are good for you. Because ARVs are good.

What is antiretroviral treatment?

Antiretroviral treatment (also known as antiretroviral therapy or ART) are the drugs that treat HIV. Taking ART means that people living with HIV can live [long and healthy lives](#). ART is [not a cure for HIV](#), but it keeps HIV under control, so it does not affect your health, and you can carry on with life as usual.

How does antiretroviral treatment work?

Without treatment, [HIV attacks the immune system](#) - the part of your body that protects you from other infections. If people living with HIV do not take treatment, they become more vulnerable to [other illnesses](#). ART stops HIV from [making copies of itself](#). This keeps the amount of virus in your body low, protecting your immune system, so you are less likely to get sick.

With good healthcare and treatment, people with HIV can expect to live as long as people who do not have HIV. You can continue to have relationships, work or study, make plans, and have a family – whatever you would have done before your HIV diagnosis.

By keeping the amount of HIV in your body low, ART also reduces the risk of HIV being passed on. People living with HIV who take their treatment properly (at the right times and as advised by a doctor) can achieve something called an [‘undetectable viral load’](#). This is when the amount of HIV in their body has been reduced to such low levels that it cannot be passed on through sex. To know if you have an undetectable viral load, it’s important to attend regular appointments with your healthcare team to have your [viral load measured](#) – this can tell you how effective your treatment is and how much HIV there is in your body.

Scriptures for Sermon: James 1:17; Proverbs 4:6;

Before we talk about why ARVs are good, let us remind ourselves about what the Bible says regarding something that is good. In the book of James chapter one, the Bible says; **James 1:17**

“¹⁷Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

The Bible says every good and perfect gift comes from above. Good and perfect gifts come from God. Think of all the good things you have, all those things come from the Lord. Your children, your spouses, your business, your job, you name it, as long as it is good, it comes from God. God gives us good things for our benefit and enjoyment. Remember, John 10:10 says, He came that we may have abundant life.

From what we know about ARTs, we know that they have helped to prolong lives. ARTs are therefore good. God has used the wisdom he has given his people to develop medicine through science. God has provided something good through ARTs.

As people of faith, let us take advantage of the good gift that God has given us to prolong our lives. If you are living positively, use this gift and live a long life, even with HIV. Let us encourage one another to take ARTs because they are good and, therefore, a gift from God.

Use the wisdom that God has given you. Do not ignore it.

Proverbs 4:6

“6 Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you.”

Proverbs 29:18

“18 Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom’s instruction.”

Everyone living with HIV deserves treatment right now! Take heed to the wisdom instruction about the goodness of ARVs. Start treatment! Treatment is free, and it works for the whole family

SERMON 6 – THERE IS HOPE FOR THOSE LIVING WITH HIV!

Introduction

In most cases, when we encounter problems as children of God, we lose hope. Knowing that you have HIV after going through a testing process can be very hard and difficult. Some people have even considered taking their own lives because they feel their dreams and future has been taken away. This is where we, as Christians, need to be different. There is hope for everyone living with HIV.

Scriptures for Sermon: Psalm 33: 20 – 22; 1 Peter 1:3; Proverbs 11:14; Galatians 6:2; Proverbs 24:6

Where can we find hope?

We can find many examples of hope – and, consequently, faith – in the Bible. Let us consider the one from a Psalm of David below, **Psalm 33:20-22**:

“We put our hope in the Lord. He is our help and our shield. In Him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in His holy Name. Let Your unfailing love surround us, Lord, for **our hope is in You alone.”**

David wrote a lot about hope in the book of Psalms. David boldly asserted his hope was in God alone. He was not a man trying to find hope in the circumstances of his life, but rather was looking only to God for that security and strength. He seemed to understand that all the striving and the business of life spent pursuing the things humans tend to look to for security offer no real hope or stability. While the unfailing love of the Lord God Almighty brought with it the confident hope of salvation, the same should be for us today. No matter what problem or situation comes our way, our hope should be firmly in God. Even when living with HIV, we should not despair: our hope should always be in the Lord.

In **1 Peter 1:3**, the word of God says

“Blessed be the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

The writer states that believers are given a living hope through Jesus Christ. We are believers, and we should have hope because we have Christ in us. This hope is not just for the future when we will be with Christ forever. It is also for now because God promises He will never leave us or forsake us Hebrews 13:5.

Living hope also enables us to live without despair as we encounter suffering and trials in this present life: “Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed daily. We cannot survive long without hope. Hope keeps us going through painful experiences and fear of what the future may hold.

In this world where people face HIV and AIDS, poverty, diseases, hunger, injustice, disaster, etc., we need a living hope. That hope is only in God.

Role of Believers

- Everyone in the church has a role in ensuring that we all have hope in God. Remember, we are all members of the same body of Christ. If one part suffers, we all suffer together. So let us encourage each other in any situations that we go through.
- Pray for one another. Let us continue to pray for each other. In Galatians 6:2, the word of God says we should “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

Listen to the advice of others

It is important for all of us, including those living with HIV, to take advice and guidance from those with helpful information, including doctors and other health workers from the hospital. As the writer of the book of Proverbs puts it:

Proverbs 11:14,

“¹⁴ For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers.”

Proverbs 24:6,

“Surely you need guidance to wage war, and victory is won through many advisers.”

We will all have the victory over main things and live positively if we listen and use the advice and guidance we get from others.