

Stepping With the Spirit

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1).” This is the heart of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Jesus has freed us from the shackles of our sin, but what now? What does freedom look like? Freedom is a scary place to be sometimes, because it means we have to make some decisions. What, if anything, are we called to? Forget for a minute about where you live or what kind of job you have or who you want to marry. That is not the call that I am talking about. Those things only matter in that they can add or detract from your ability to seek first God’s kingdom; to keep in step with the Spirit. The purpose of our freedom is not to seek our own ends, but to restore our image-bearing capacity.

When Scripture puts forth a call it is virtually always a general call to pursue Christ (and not to a particular place or ministry).¹ The Spirit gives us a new heart, one that is alive in Christ. But he does not stop there. He then births in us ongoing desire for Christ and moves us towards him (Eze. 36:26-27). As the Spirit lives in us he bears fruit in us. It is inevitable, because God is good and can do no wrong. Good trees bear good fruit. And none of this is from ourselves. Hear me family. This is not a call to better morality nor to more pious piety, because we can drum those things up on our own. Working against murder and rape and infidelity and drunkenness and hatred is not uniquely Christian. What makes the life of a Christian unique is our source of holiness. All other religions are built on man’s strivings, but Christianity is built on God living in us and working his purposes through us. We do strive, but it must always be through God’s power (Phil 2:12-13, 1 Pet. 4:11).

¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. (Gal. 5:16-18)

To gratify something is “to be a source of or give pleasure or satisfaction to².” The Holy Spirit cannot gratify the desires of the sinful nature because it is incompatible with who he is. Thus, where the Spirit meets sin sin there will be struggle. If there is no struggle in the face of sin, there is no Spirit and no salvation. Brothers and sisters, make no mistake, you will sin (1 John 1:10). That is the point of verse 17, where it says “you do not do what you want.” Praise the Lord, that even while we are being purified we are already declared righteous through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Though we fall again and again, we are already seated with Christ in the heavenly realms.

The point here is in the striving. It is about the overall flavor of your life. Are you struggling against your sin or are you apathetic towards it? If the Spirit is in you, and he

¹ See also 2 Tim. 1:8-9; Col 3:1-17;

² Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

is in every Christian, than you will be in conflict with and struggling against sin. The Holy Spirit is in us simply cannot abide by sin. He makes war against it, every day and every night until our position in Christ is fully realized in eternity. Do not quench the Spirit within you. Do not feed your sinful nature, because it will cost you your life. Rather, cut it off (Matt. 5:28, John 15:2) and put it to death (Gal. 5:5). There is no repentance without acknowledgement of sin and there is no salvation without repentance.

¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal. 5:19-21)

The temptation for us when we come to a list in Scripture is to speed through it. We have two lists here so the temptation is doubled. Let's take a moment, though, to dwell on each of the words. I'll give you a few thoughts on each one but I challenge you to go home and prayerfully meditate over this list. Ask God to reveal where you have sin that needs to be dealt with. Ask for the boldness to deal with it. Finally, ask for each of the fruits of the Spirit to be grown in you.

SEXUAL IMMORALITY...Any sexual act or lust that goes beyond the boundaries of a marriage between one man and one woman (1 Cor 7:2). This includes incest (Lev 18:6; Deut 27:20,22), fornication (Num 25:1,6; 1 Sam 2:22), adultery (2 Sam 11:4; John 4:17-18), rape (Gen 34:1-2; 2 Sam 13:10-14), homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27), prostitution (Deut 23:18), and bestiality (Deut 27:21).

IMPURITY...The state of being unclean. "According to Jesus, 'What comes out of a man makes him unclean ... evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, ...' (Mk. 7:16, 21–22)... The essence of uncleanness is opposition to God. [In the New Testament], as in the prophets, Mk. 7:21 and Mt. 15:19, uncleanness is most often associated with sexual sin (e.g. Rom. 1:24; Gal. 5:19; 1 Thes. 4:7), so that impurity is virtually identified with misuse of sex."³

DEBAUCHERY...debauchery is "extreme indulgence in sensuality."⁴ We live in a world that exalts this idea. It offers us the false freedom of uninhibited sexuality. Let yourself go. Have sex with whomever and however you wish. If you listen to your co-workers or even fellow church members you may hear shades of this as they pine after the life of so many of the sports, movie, and music stars --fast, sexy, and glamorous. When we have such a tiny god as nominal Christianity offers, unrestrained sensuality becomes our hope of transcending the monotony of so-called ordinary life.

We prefer to think of sin at its extreme, because that allows us to look past our little sins. Because we are not like the real "sinner" who hooks up with a different girl every

³ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (211–212). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

⁴ *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.).

week we're okay, right? Even though we're still having sex with our woman (who we're not married to) it's actually a good thing because it's one man and one woman, right? And we're "committed" to each other so we got the whole bible thing covered, right? Listen to yourself! Can't we just call sin what it is? Can't we let it grieve us as it does Jesus? Sin is not simply our physical acts, even our thoughts condemn us. A life of little sins lands someone in hell just as fast as a life of debauchery.

Traditionally the church has not done a very good job of dealing with sexual sin. We have focused on this group of sins to the exclusion of others. We have not let people be in process, particularly those who are attracted to the same sex. Homosexual acts and homosexual lusts are condemned by Scripture, but so are heterosexual acts and lusts that crossover the boundary of marriage. Those who are struggling in Jesus' power against their sinful desires, whether homosexual or heterosexual in nature, should be welcomed as family. Again, the point is in the striving. But, those who see no need to struggle and want worldly tolerance rather than the life-transforming grace of Jesus are not family because they are not living in step with the Spirit.

IDOLATRY...This is what most, if not all sins, boil down to. It breaks the first and greatest commandment (Deut 6:5, Matt 22:38). Idolatry is placing priority on something other than our King. It is giving the first fruits of our energy and resources to anything other than God. We are all guilty of this; probably many times every day. We make idols of ourselves, others, objects, organizations, or even ideas. This is why we must renew our minds (Rom.12:2), because we live in a broken world that spoon feeds us images of what we ought to value. Our default is to use these reference points when we make a decision, rather than letting Scripture give us eyes to see what is real and what is fake, what is worth pursuing and what is not.

WITCHCRAFT...We just got done with Halloween so the images witches and wizards are fresh in our minds. For the purposes of understanding this passage, throw those images out. I say this because "in the popular sense of the word no mention is made either of witches or of witchcraft in Scripture."⁵ Witchcraft in scripture usually refers to those who attempt to speak with the dead like the "witch of En-dor" (1 Sam. 28) or those with "a spirit of divination" (Acts 16:16). These were men and women who looked to some other spirit than God for information that could not be known by human means.

If you think about it we do this too. We have psychics. We have wiccans. We have cults like Mormonism born out of "special revelations" that are inconsistent with Scripture. We have Jehovah Witnesses and mainstream Christians trying to predict the day of the Lord's return, which is again contrary to anything we find in God's Word. Our community loves to experiment with other spirits and let those spirits inform our lives. Let me use horoscopes as an example. How many of you not only know your astrological sign but believe that it tells you something about yourself? By that I mean, have you ever justified or made sense of your life using that sign saying things like "I'm a _____ so I do _____"? That is the type of witchcraft Scripture condemns.

⁵ Easton, M. (1996). *Easton's Bible dictionary*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

HATRED...“prejudiced hostility or animosity.”⁶ We live in a city of uncommon prejudice and we are not immune to it. It is not enough to say I have a black friend or a white friend or an Asian friend. This is something I must fight every time I see the effects of sinfulness in our community. It is all too easy for me to see the unashamed prostitution, drunkenness, thievery, destruction, and ambivalence and to tie that to blacks who make up more than ninety percent of our community. But hatred is not just a racial thing. Do you hold a grudge against anyone? Do you have any enemies? Did your parents hurt you? Do you have a co-worker you cannot stand? Anyone at Mack Ave you just do not get along with? Do you find yourself cursing at referees or the guy who cut you off on the road? Confess your anger, family, and turn away from it.

DISCORD...“lack of agreement or harmony (as between persons, things, or ideas)”⁷. What do we do when we disagree with a brother or sister in Christ? Do we pretend the disagreement doesn't exist? Do we gossip about it? Do we attack the other person's character? Do we assume that we are without fault and wait for the other person to come crawling back to us with an apology? Or do we seek reconciliation? Do we start by humbly meeting with that person one on one? If that doesn't work, do we then invite in one or two other people?⁸

JEALOUSY...“Both Heb. and Gk. words refer to an exclusive single-mindedness of emotion which may be morally blameworthy or praiseworthy depending on whether the object of the jealousy is the self or some cause beyond the self. In the former case the result is envy, or hatred of others (Gn. 30:1; Pr. 3:31; Ezk. 31:9), which for the NT is the antithesis of love and hence the enemy of true Christian fellowship (1 Cor. 13:4; 2 Cor. 12:20; Jas. 3:14). The Bible however also represents the other possibility, of a ‘divine jealousy’ (2 Cor. 11:2), a consuming single-minded pursuit of a good end (1 Ki. 19:10; Ex. 20:5; 1 Cor. 12:31).”⁹ Jealousy here refers to a single-minded pursuit of self. It is the hoarding of resources for ourselves. It is the guarding of our time and our dreams against others and against God.

FITS OF RAGE...“violent and uncontrolled anger.”¹⁰ For some of us, we physically lash out when we lose our temper. We blindly strike our friends and family--husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, son or daughter. Other times we do this verbally and that leaves its own deep wounds. For some of us alcohol or stress or fatigue brings this out in us. For me, it was and probably still is playing sports. We are quick to excuse ourselves and separate out the actions from who we are. “I don't know what got into me,” we say, as if

⁶ Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. (Eleventh ed.).

⁷ Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. (Eleventh ed.).

⁸ See Matthew 18:15-17 for more on dealing with conflict between members of Christ's body.

⁹ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (544). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

¹⁰ Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. (Eleventh ed.).

it wasn't even our fault. Though we may desperately want to blame others or our circumstances for our anger we must own it for ourselves. It is our sin and we must put it to death.

SELFISH AMBITION...“concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself : seeking or concentrating on one’s own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others.”¹¹ When we make decisions about what to buy, where to live, what school to go to, or whatever else our default mode is to look out for ourselves. No one had to teach us how to love ourselves. Family, ask yourself, do we ever make decisions based on what’s best for God’s kingdom or his body around us? Or do we settle for what makes us comfortable and what brings us worldly success?

DISSENSIONS... are disagreements or divides that occur between groups of people, or FACTIONS, rather than individuals. Beware family, dissensions and factions have a way of creeping in unnoticed. Our differences--married/unmarried, young/old, college-educated/high school educated, Detroiters/non-Detroiters, white/black--can quickly become grounds for division rather than for celebration. This requires no conscious effort on our part. We have simply to let ourselves naturally gravitate towards those that are like minded or similarly situated. If we do not intentionally address issues as they come up and do not seek to enjoy those that are different than us then our body will never be unified in Christ. Five or ten years down the road, after the enthusiasm has worn off, we will all go our separate ways.

ENVY...“A grudging regard for the advantages seen to be enjoyed by others... ‘to look closely at’, then ‘to look with malicious intent’ (see 1 Sa. 18:9)...Jealousy makes us fear to lose what we possess; envy creates sorrow that others have what we have not. It was the spirit which crucified our Lord (Mt. 27:18; Mk. 15:10).”¹² Do others seem happier because they have kids or don’t have kids or have a great job or house or car or a plethora of talents? What keeps us from rejoicing in the blessings poured out on our brothers and sisters? Family of God, fight for unity. Do not give selfishness a foothold. Do not let jealousy and envy of one another go unchecked in your own life or in the lives of other Christians. Our unity is a gift that only comes when our gaze is fixed on Christ, so fight for that single-minded gaze. Be jealous for God’s glory. That is how we keep in step with the Spirit.

DRUNKENNESS... “the state of inebriation induced by the ingestion of too much alcohol...wine was enjoyed in Israel as a divinely given fruit of the ground....On the other hand, drunkenness was persistently condemned (e.g., Gen. 9:20-27; Gal. 5:21). It rendered one insensible and imperceptive, a social nuisance, an economic ruin, and a moral and spiritual reprobate. This it caused through its power to deceive, conveying a false sense of clear perception, intelligence, and power....Sobriety and wine in

¹¹ *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.).

¹² Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (325). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

moderation come to represent a religion opposed to the false consciousness arising from intoxication with false values and practices sponsored by other gods.”¹³

ORGIES... “secret ceremonial rites held in honor of an ancient Greek or Roman deity and usually characterized by ecstatic singing and dancing; drunken revelry; a sexual encounter involving many people *also* : an excessive sexual indulgence.”¹⁴ Here we are once again back to the extremes of indulgence seen with debauchery. It is not tip-toeing along an edge but diving in head first. Contrary to the teachings of many fundamentalist churches, Scripture does not condemn alcohol or having sex for pleasure, but it does condemn setting those things up as ends in themselves. Drunkenness, orgies, and debauchery go beyond the moderation that our freedom allows for. Instead of one or two drinks we keep going. Instead of reserving ourselves for our husband or wife we seek out sex wherever and whenever and with whomever.

One of our problems with sin is that we are asking the wrong questions. We ask, “How much is too much?” and “How close is too close?” The goal of Christians is not to find out where the line between sin and righteousness is drawn. Such a mindset actually fixates on and glorifies sin. And when sin becomes the goal, God’s call to holiness becomes burdensome indeed. To seek out this line is to have an utter disregard for the ugliness and weightiness of sin. It is to spit again in the face of your loving Savior who endured a horrible death to pay for your sin. Family of God can we ask new questions? Can we ask “How might I add value (through the power of the Spirit) to God’s kingdom right now?” or “How might I cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in my life?”

We are no longer under the law because through Jesus we fulfill it and have only to follow our new heaven-bent desires birthed in us by the Spirit. Following our God-inspired desires will fulfill the requirements of the law, but because we are following our desires the requirements are no longer a burden. So give the Spirit free rein in your life. Let him graft you to the vine, in order that you may bear fruits in keeping with your repentance (Matt. 3:8; Luke 3:8; John 15:1-8). When your sinful nature rebels against the Spirit, surrender to Him. Do not quench the Spirit, he doing all for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28). We cultivate the fruits of the Spirit by letting the Spirit have his way with our hearts, not by working to be more loving or more faithful. The Spirit’s fruits are other-worldly fruits that cannot be conjured up by mere men. We may impress one another with our imitations of sacrificial love and unwavering faithfulness, but for the fruit to last it must be born of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Gal 5:22–24

¹³ Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper’s Bible dictionary* (1st ed.) (229). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

¹⁴ *Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.).

LOVE...Love is the essence of Christ. It is the summation of all his other-worldly qualities. It set him apart from the world and sets his follower's apart too (John 13:35). If we are without love, we are without God because God is love (1 John 4:8). Our world does not know God, thus it knows nothing of love. When God speaks of love we cannot interpret it using the broken and diluted images offered us by the world. Love does not equal sex. Love does not equal blind tolerance. Love does not equal saying nothing when saying something could mean the difference between eternal suffering and eternal joy. We must fight to preserve true love in all its potency. God's love for us is a grand and wonderful thing. Our love for others, if it is to tell them anything of God, must be grand and wonderful too.

¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 1 John 3:16-18

God defines love for us and captures its essence in Jesus' death on the cross. Godly love is compassion realized at any cost. It cannot be contained as a thought or a sentiment, but must be lived out. Neither can true love be limited to good deeds, but must flow from humble truth. We may try to get ourselves stuck by asking the question, "But what does laying our lives down for our brother's look like?" but John does not give us any such opportunity. Have pity on your brother and sister. That is how we love like God. Pity them for their common human spiritual depravity. Love them by inviting them quickly and frequently to know Christ. Pity also their physical needs. John's insistence on using our material possessions to love others begs the question, "Why do so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ, both at home and abroad, still suffer while we pile up material possessions?" Could it be because we are not so loving as we think?

Do not give into the fatalism that says poverty will always be with us, so what is the point in trying to affect it? In the same vein of fatalism, we could ask "why preach?" We'll never see every person won over for Christ will we? Christ wants the world to see his love lived out through us. The goal of love is not to end poverty. The goal is compassion for miserable souls and miserable situations. The goal is justice. The goal is bearing God's image. Can we bring heaven to earth? Yes, in part. That is the here, but not yet fully, aspect of the Kingdom proclamation in Scripture. Regardless of outcome we are called to work compassion and justice in the world around us. We do not need to eliminate world hunger to love well the homeless man that wanders Mack Avenue or the single mother who is heating her home for the winter with a gas stove.

²⁷ "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to

get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Luke 6:27-35

Notice the extraordinary quality of Christian love; it does not stop with our brothers and sisters. What is normal worldly love look like? It is loving those who love you and being kind to those who are kind to you. There is no reward for this kind of love. This is the love of mere men. It is broken, fallen, and comes at no cost to the lover. But what of Christ-like love? His is an otherworldly love, culminating in humility and submissiveness of our Creator dying for his rebellious creation. Godly love seeks out those that would hurt it. It turns the other cheek and goes beyond what is forcefully demanded of it. This love has no sense of its own rights. It bears no grudges but spends itself in prayer for the salvation of its enemies.¹⁵ Love is what sets every Christian apart. It is not an optional accessory but a means through which we help people die well, both ourselves¹⁶ and others who currently can't hear the gospel above the din of injustice or spiritual darkness. Remember Christ's example, godly love is compassion realized at any cost.

JOY...“In both OT and NT joy is consistently the mark both individually of the believer and corporately of the church. It is a quality, and not simply an emotion, grounded upon God himself and indeed derived from him (Ps. 16:11; Phil. 4:4; Rom. 15:13), which characterizes the Christian's life on earth (1 Pet. 1:8), and also anticipates eschatologically the joy of being with Christ for ever in the kingdom of heaven (*cf.* Rev. 19:7).”¹⁷ Knowledge of a future reward can actually change our mindset and our emotions. Think of the child who is offered an ice cream cone if she will sit through a long car ride. The more certain the reward and the greater its value, the more that knowledge will affect you. When we become Christians we each get the Holy Spirit. He opens our eyes to a new reality; not all at once but in a continual unveiling. It is He that reveals to us the greatness and certainty of our reward. Unlike the child, however, we do not have to wait for that reward. The Kingdom is at hand, though not yet fully.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Cor 4:16–18

We may readily understand the joy that comes from seeing others come to know Christ; to have the weight of their sins removed from their shoulders and be freed up to live life as it was intended. It may even be easy to rejoice in their sanctification, as they grow in faith and godliness (1 Thes. 2:19f; *cf.* Phil. 2:2). But what is hard for us to wrap our minds around is the idea of joy in, and as a result of, suffering. Only when we value what God values will the otherworldly call to joy make sense to us. But what do we say to the mother who has lost a child? What do we say to dad who cannot find a job to

¹⁵ For more on loving your enemies see Matthew 5:41-48.

¹⁶ See Matthew 25:31-46

¹⁷ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (615–616). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

support his family even after months of searching and dozens of applications and interviews? What do we say to the children who have endured physical, emotional, or sexual abuse? What do we say to the young man who would rather kill himself than live one more day in this broken and hopeless world? What do we say to Leon and Rebecca when they are held up at gunpoint in front of their home? What do we say to you when your car is broken into for the 4th time since joining Mack Ave?

Most of us would probably say nothing. Others would probably offer sympathy. Very few would offer hope. In fact any talk of joy to those in the midst of trials might sound empty and calloused. But did not Paul do this? Did not writers of Scripture applaud, encourage, and even expect joy to be had in the midst of even the most severe trials?¹⁸ This paradoxical exhortation was made on the grounds of the great reward awaiting us. Yes, we have empathy and tenderness and compassion but we offer hope as well. Our hope is only empty when it is not in Christ. Scripture urges us again and again and again to live like we believe that Jesus is the ultimate reward and that our God is a good and loving father. Why do we agree with this right up until we encounter the pain of our world? Why do trials make us question whether God is truly all-good and all-powerful?¹⁹

¹² Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. 1 Peter 4:12–16

So when trials come our way. We are not to receive them as the world does with complaints and questions of “why do bad things happen to good people (like me)?” Remember that although the world was created perfect that we humans gave that up early on. Remember no one is good, especially us. We deserve eternal suffering for our rejection of God. Then also remember the grace that God poured out on us when he died for us, his enemies, and gave us new life. Rejoice that he counts us worthy to retell that story by laying down our own lives and possessions. Rejoice when our talents and health and family and possessions are taken from us because we still get Christ (Hab 3:17-18, Matt 13:44). Rejoice because, with our idols stripped away, we (not to mention the world around us) can finally see just how precious Christ is. Joy is not the same as peaceful acceptance. It is not a stoic refusal to weep or mourn. Joy is an emotion. It is an unshakably hopeful disposition, even when all around us is falling apart, founded on the firm belief in Christ’s redemption.

PEACE...“The OT word for peace, *šālôm*, means ‘completeness’, ‘soundness’, ‘well-being’....Because of the world’s chaos through man’s sin, and because peace comes only as God’s gift, the Messianic hope was of an age of peace (Is. 2:2–4; 11:1–9; Hg.

¹⁸ Isa 49:13; 54:1; Luk 6:23; Col. 1:24; 2 Cor. 6:10; 8:2; 1 Pet. 4:13; Heb. 10:34; Jas 1:2

¹⁹ An adequate answer to that is well beyond the scope of this sermon, but I encourage you to read two books if you struggle with this: *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis and *The Gift of Pain* by Paul Brand and Philip Yancey.

2:7–9), or of the advent of the Prince of peace (Is. 9:6f.; cf. Je. 33:15f.; Ezk. 34:23ff.; Mi. 5:5; Zc. 9:9f.). The NT shows the fulfillment of this hope. In Christ peace has come (Lk. 1:79; 2:14, 29f.). By him it is bestowed (Mk. 5:34; Lk. 7:50; Jn. 20:19, 21, 26), and his disciples are its messengers (Lk. 10:5f.; Acts 10:36)...the word in the NT has the full content of the OT *šālôm*, and nearly always carries a spiritual connotation...For sinful man there must first be peace with God, the removal of sin's enmity through the sacrifice of Christ (Rom. 5:1; Col. 1:20). Then inward peace can follow (Phil. 4:7), unhindered by the world's strife (Jn. 14:27; 16:33). Peace between man and man is part of the purpose for which Christ died (Eph. 2) and of the Spirit's work (Gal. 5:22); but man must also be active to promote it (Eph. 4:3; Heb. 12:14), not merely as the elimination of discord, but as the harmony and true functioning of the body of Christ (Rom. 14:19; 1 Cor. 14:33).²⁰ Are we at peace with God? Or do we live in unconfessed sin and with unrepentant hearts? We cannot let sin fester. It is like a cancer that quickly overwhelms the body. We must be continually confessing to God and to each other our shortcomings. Forgiveness must be offered liberally and repeatedly.

PATIENCE...It is "God-exercised, or God-given, restraint in face of opposition or oppression. It is not passivity. The initiative lies with God's love, or the Christian's, in meeting wrong in this way."²¹ Biblical patience is constancy and steadfast perseverance. It is also slowness in avenging wrongs. Patience is about endurance to the end. While our family and friends and classmates chase after temporary pleasures and instant gratification we wait for the Lord to fully recreate us and the world (Ps. 37:7; Rom. 8:25). This waiting is not a lounging around sort of waiting (Heb. 6:12; Jam. 5:7-10). It is the patient endurance of a marathon runner, hitting her pace mile after mile. And it is eager expectation, watchful and alert, ready at any moment for the bridegroom's return.

³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. ³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. Heb 10:32–36

Patience is every Christian's call. We are to be patient in everything and with everyone. Trials will come and continue to come. Thus patience is never a one-time call. It may be passive endurance in general trials (Luke 21:19, Matt 24:13), those due to the gospel (2 Cor 6:4; 12:12; 2 Tim 3:10), under chastisement (Heb 12:7), under undeserved affliction (1 Pet 2:20), under active persecution (Rom 2:7), in fruit bearing (Luke 8:15), running the appointed race (Heb 12:1). Patience perfects Christian character (Jam. 1:4) affliction. It is born of wisdom, the proper understanding of the Lord (Prov. 14:29). Patience paves the way for our joy despite the broken world around us. Only with

²⁰ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (891). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

²¹ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (873). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

patience could we rejoice even in the midst of trials and trials should only ever grow our patience (Jam. 1:3).

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you....³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. Matt. 5:11-12, 38-42

What could make us rejoice in false accusations? What could make us cheerfully go above and beyond what is asked of us by those taking advantage of us? Jesus does not ask his disciples to solemnly endure hardships, he tells them to get excited. Only a heavenward gaze and the promise of the joy set before us could fuel such endurance (Rom. 8:25). Cheerful patience in the face of persecution is a powerful and other-worldly force. What could be more unnatural to a fallen people bent on protecting its rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? It is the heaping of coals on the head of the world. It is overcoming by being overrun. We are not given a choice. To follow Christ is to accept the call to patience. We cannot excuse our frustrations with others and God or hide behind the pretense of righteous anger. We cannot even complain (Phil 2:4). We have no cause for self-pity because, Jesus, our great reward awaits us.

KINDNESS...To exercise kindness is to do good for another. Kindness in Scripture flows from a goodness of the heart, one with integrity. It is always active. We learn about kindness from God whose applies it both generally to mankind (Acts 14:17) and specifically to his followers (Rom. 11:22; Tit. 3:3-5). When we show kindness to others, particularly those that are not kind to us, we are bearing God's image. We are retelling the story of redemption (Lev. 25:25). It is evidence of the Spirit's regenerative work in us (Gal. 5:22) and we are being used by God to draw others to him (Hos. 11:3-5). Scripture speaks of meeting physical and spiritual needs. God instructs us and uses us to meet physical or emotional needs, while he takes on the spiritual needs. Though human kindness can be directed anywhere (1 Thess. 5:15), God admonishes us repeatedly to be showing kindness to the poor. (Prov. 14:21, 31; 19:17). This does not mean we forget about the needs of others, but it does mean we ought to give special attention to those with the most needs. This is a necessary product of the Spirit living within us. We start by looking to the poor in our own body (Deut 15:1-11) and then to the poor of the world.

We probably think of ourselves as relatively kind people. If a need is staring us in the face then we will not back down from meeting it, right? One big effect of us pursuing various worldly reference points is that we end up with a lifestyle that chokes out our ability to be kind. We do not have to be unkind people to arrive at a place where our lives are virtually incompatible to meeting needs because we do not have enough time or resources or we simply are not exposed to needs.

No time. Have you ever heard a well-meaning Christian, including yourself, say to another person “I’d love to help you out with that. Just give me a call when you need me.” We can say this with much honest enthusiasm because we do think it is a good idea to help others out. But what happens when they do call? Do you find yourself saying “Oh, I’m sorry but I’m really busy that day. I’ve got family coming...I’m going to a Tiger’s game...I’m helping with youth group...I’ve got a test that I have to study for... Maybe next time though. I’m really sorry.” We have affirmed that we are kind people because we offered help, but then things “just didn’t work out.” Yet, is it possible that we have some say over whether things work out? Is it possible that we are not available to help others because we’ve filled our schedules with us? What would it take to be available to others for a few hours every week or every day?

No resources. We may find ourselves saying, “I have my own problems, I can’t be worrying about other people” or “I don’t have any money, shouldn’t somebody be helping me?” There are at least two problems with these sentiments. One, we are all called to kindness and we are all called bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2). It is part of the universal call to Christ-likeness and not dependent on our situation or preference. Second, we often have much more than we think but we spend it on all many of things that do nothing to build God’s kingdom. We insist on buying the right organic food or the perfect entertainment system with the requisite all-inclusive HD sports package or the right-sized house or the right-sized rims or the right gym membership or attend the right prestigious school or have saved up for the right vacation. Only after we account for all these “must-haves” do we tithe; probably not the standard 10% but something. And if, which is a terribly big if, we have anything leftover after tithing we may think about giving it to the Salvation Army.

No exposure. We may always have the poor with us, but that does not stop us from (consciously or unconsciously) setting up our lives in such a way that we rarely see them. For a number of reasons, poverty tends to aggregate. Whether it is in the big city or in rural areas, those who live in the under-resourced cycle rarely interact with those from the resourced cycle. It is particularly easy for the resourced to avoid the under-resourced. We work and play and live life in areas that are comfortable. If our work is in a less favorable area then we live somewhere else and commute in. In Detroit, this allows us to bypass the need that screams at us with every burned out building and weathered prostitute and pleading addict that you find when you drive down Mack Avenue from Grosse Pointe to the downtown.

No matter where we live we probably do not have to go very far to find need. But, we may have to intentionally step outside of our lifestyle and patterns to find it. We may even find that we can best meet it if we move to where it’s at. That may mean we pass up on that opportunity to live in the ‘safe’ neighborhood with the nice house and the great schools within walking distance. Does everybody need to move? No, not everybody needs to move. But many, many more should because when you look at the big picture we have do a pitiful job of showing compassion and kindness to those who need it most. In order to grow we need to be intentionally structuring our lives in such a

way as to increase our ability to be kind to others. Without intentionality we end up going along with the status quo and chasing after what the world thinks is important.

Nice neighborhoods have needs too. Yes, there are needs. But there are an abundance of physical and spiritual resources too; more than enough to meet those needs. If all the middle and upper class Christians put their time and energy towards exercising compassion and kindness to their neighbor we'd probably find two things. In areas of affluence we would have all the neighbors' needs covered three or four times over without breaking a sweat. But in areas where poverty rules, neighbors needs would go unmet even if every Christian there was doing everything they could. We are naturally better at meeting the needs around us. Why is it so wrong to ask people to put themselves in situations where their natural tendencies will have greater effects for God's kingdom?

The call for kindness, as with other biblical calls, comes with promises of reward on earth and in heaven (Prov. 11:16-17). Jesus tells us that blessed are the pure in heart—kind, morally good, and with integrity—because they will see God (Matthew 5:8). They meet with God and glorify him every time they alleviate the suffering of the least of mankind. Christian kindness brings life to body and to the world. It builds up, but does not tear down. It can come in the form of a cold cup of water or in an encouraging word (Prov. 12:25). Kindness can also come as a timely rebuke (Ps. 141:5), just remember that there are ways of calling out sin in people that actually “show contempt for the riches of [God's] kindness, tolerance, and patience (Rom. 2:4).” In our encouragements and rebukes we are to demonstrate the same qualities with others. We can do nothing apart from what we have been shown to do and our efforts must be done with the goal of building up the body of Christ, which is God's kingdom here on earth.

GOODNESS...“Goodness in man is not a mere passive quality, but the deliberate preference of right to wrong, the firm and persistent resistance of all moral evil, and the choosing and following of all moral good.”²² Scripture tells us that no one is good not even one (Rom. 3:10-20). We struggle to believe this don't we? We struggle to believe that we are not good. That is why we are comfortable asking questions like “Why do bad things happen to good people?” We do not understand the weightiness of our sin and our deadness to all that is of God. Only with the Holy Spirit, at work within us bearing fruit, are we able to choose right over wrong. Goodness is not our natural tendency. Nor do we automatically choose good over evil when we come to know Christ. Sanctification and renewing of our minds takes place over months and years. We must go back to Scriptures again and again with humility in order to begin to test and approve what God's will is.

FAITHFULNESS...“steadfast in affection or allegiance. Faithful implies unswerving adherence to a person or thing or to the oath or promise by which a tie was contracted...a firm resistance to any temptation to desert or betray...imperviousness to influences that would weaken it...steady and unwavering course in love, allegiance, or

²² Easton, M. (1996). *Easton's Bible dictionary*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

conviction.”²³ Are we faithful to our God? Do we seek him above all else or do we get side-tracked by the false gods offered to us by the world? Do we stick by truth in a world that pressures us to compromise in the name of intelligence or tolerance? Are we faithful to our spouses or do we let our eyes and hearts wander? Are we faithful to our word? Do we follow through on promises? Can we be trusted to show up for discipleship or MACC group or Sunday morning childcare or does something always seem to come up? Do we routinely show up late to church or outreaches, if we show up at all? What do our lives tell others about the faithfulness of our God?

GENTLENESS...Gentleness here refers to a mildness of disposition. Though most often translated as gentleness, it has also been translated as consideration, humility, and meekness. As such, gentleness is a very un-American idea. But it is one of the characteristics of that reaps happiness for the followers of Christ (Matt. 5:5). Gentleness is particularly hard for those of us who love to “keep it real” and pride ourselves on “saying it like it is.” We like to be blunt, preferring to have others feel the weight of our words. Often times that is because we are hurting, and we want others to feel that pain. So for the truth tellers, I say be humble. Truth is good and should be shared *with* discernment. Is what you are doing building up the body or tearing it down? Does your brother or sister need a callous rebuke or a tender one? The tendency of truth tellers is to get so outward-focused, overwhelmed with pointing out the sin in others, that we forget about our sin. We leave the plank in our own eye and render ourselves too blind to be helpful or safe to others.

So let us be meek. Let our gentleness be a healing salve to the wounds around us. Let us not be timid though. Timidity is not a fruit of the Spirit. We are to be bold, yet gentle. This is, again, not something we can conjure up on our own. This is a balance that can only be struck by the Spirit himself. And do not try to justify our lack of gentleness. Do not think to yourself, “If Jonah could convert more than 40,000 people with a spiteful heart then surely truth is all we need. If Jesus could overturn tables and tell-off Jewish leaders then we have no need to check our ‘righteous’ anger.” Forget for a moment that anger against another is condemned as murder by Christ elsewhere (Matt. 5:21-22). Why coddle people?” we may ask. Well, God commands it and not only to the naturally timid Christians whose tenderness comes easily. This is not the domain of Mother Teresa alone, but a benchmark that we are all expected to strive for.

SELF-CONTROL...“There is a mean streak to authentic self-control.... Self-control is not for the timid. When we want to grow in it, not only do we nurture an exuberance for Jesus Christ, we also demand of ourselves a hatred for sin.... The only possible attitude toward out-of-control desire is a declaration of all-out war.... There is something about war that sharpens the senses.... You hear a twig snap or the rustling of leaves and you are in attack mode. Someone coughs and you are ready to pull the trigger. Even after days of little or no sleep, war keeps us vigilant.”²⁴

²³ Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. (Eleventh ed.).

²⁴ John Piper quotes Ed Welch, author of A Banquet in the Grave.

Ignoring sin is not an option. It is at war with you (1 Peter 2:11), and you must respond decisively and aggressively. Uproot. Cut off. Put to death. Make war against it. We have to acknowledge the weight of our sin. Call it what God calls it. Remember what that sin cost God. Ask for forgiveness. Turn back towards God and pursue him. Do not make light of your sin, make war against it. Grace is not a license for sin. As Eric reminded us a few weeks ago, a prisoner is not set free in order that he may go back to breaking the law, but in order that he may live freely under the law. So we too are not set free from our sin in order to revel in it. No. We are freed to live true life. We are freed to once again bear God's image, which in our sin we had lost the capacity to do. We must be equally self-controlled in cultivating the gifts of the Holy Spirit in our own life and in the lives around us. Renew your minds. Love one another. Rejoice in every circumstance. Rest in God's perfect peace. Be patient with one another.

²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. Gal. 5:24-26

The longer we do life together the easier it will be to get on each other's nerves. The novelty of being apart of this body will wear off and our differences will start to grate on each other. That is why we need patience and love and faithfulness. That is why we need the fruits of the Spirit. Without them we are sunk and have no hope of being one in Christ. Our unity cannot be achieved by getting to know each other's cultures or backgrounds or likes better. It can only be achieved by measuring our steps according to the Spirit. So let us welcome Him. Let us gratify Him and not ourselves.