



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING
Imitation is the Solution, Part 1

GALATIANS 4:12

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Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isaiah 40:1-5).

Introduction

I began last week's message from Galatians 4:8-11 with this question: Have you ever found yourself at a place in life where the way forward looks hard, so you want to turn around and go back to where you were? And I shared rather candidly about the kind of challenging week I had and why this was a particularly relevant question for me.

But then there was this week which made last week feel like I was on a vacation! In last Sunday's sermon I tried to wax eloquent about making our way through the wilderness. But now we're really in it. I'm really in it. And, because of how things unfolded in the life of our church this past week, many of you feel like you're in it as well. In fact, I've received emails from missionaries in Spain and two-time visitors to our church; and even they feel like they're in the wilderness with us as a community.

We're in the wilderness. The way forward looks hard. And the temptation is to want to go back. Perhaps you're tempted to go back. I know I have been. We are as a church in the midst of a significant wilderness trial. And, as a result, many of us are individually as well.

Crucifying the Visionary Dreamer

I certainly know that's how I feel. God's has orchestrated this entire situation as a major trial, yes, for us corporately, but also, I believe, for me personally, as your Senior Pastor. In fact, if I'm honest, I'd have to say that these first three years at Calvary have felt like one long extended trial, with lots of little and big trials along the way; culminating with the huge mess we've got on our hands right now; a mess, I might add, that I myself—precisely as your Senior Pastor and thus the lead shepherd of this flock—must ultimately take responsibility for, whether I'm entirely at fault, partially at fault, or not at fault at all.

But may I speak even more candidly to you? I must say that over the last three years things have not worked out exactly as I'd planned or hoped. Yes, there have been some wonderful things God's done along the way; and, yes, we've made some exciting strides as a church in the last several years. But things haven't gone as smoothly or as straightforwardly as I would have expected. Nor have they been met with as much success as I would have hoped. And there has been many more setbacks and, frankly, much more pushback than I would have imagined.

The Pulpit Committee never told me it was going to play out quite like this! And, frankly, when pastors find themselves in the throes of challenges like we're up against, they often sink into a bitter and self-protective attitude toward the church. Or, they simply start brushing up their resume and preparing their resignation letter. It happens all the time; it's happening right now, in fact, in perhaps hundreds of churches all across the country.

Of course, I recognize that some of the difficulties we've experienced over the past three years of my ministry are of my own making; they're the result of a lack of judgment born, youthful impatience, and sometimes just a plain failure to love others as I would want to be loved.

I also recognize, as I hope you do, that Satan isn't on holiday. No, the church's Archenemy is alive and well and at work in Oak Park. And because Calvary Memorial Church is a massively strategic beacon of light in this godless community, and because he no doubt sees that we as a church are starting to gain some traction and make strides in gospel advance, he's gotten nervous. But more than that, he's gotten aggressive.

Two days ago, I received an email from an individual who's visited our church only a few times. But this person is aware of what's going and wanted to write to express how she sees things:

Dear Pastor Wilson, I am not a member of your church. I have attended two events at your church. I think that Calvary Memorial Church is doing amazing things for God. It is great to see. . . .

I will pray for your church. I feel strongly that Satan is attacking Calvary b/c of the good works that the church is doing in the name of Jesus. IF you were lukewarm, Satan would be content. Because so many of your flock are on fire for God I can see him viewing your church as a threat. I wish that I was wise enough to offer advice. I will pray that God will be victorious in all matters regarding your church, that HE will humble everyone involved and His children will repent/submit to Him. Above all I pray that through this God will be glorified.

But, brothers and sisters, do you know who I see ultimately at work in all of this, not least in my own life and struggles over the past three years? I see a sovereign God, who loves me and you and this church, even at times with severe mercy and humbling grace.

Why God?

Why does God have us where we are right now as a church? Why, God, do you have me, as the pastor of this church, in this place? What are you doing, God, in the midst of all of this?

Perhaps you've been asking yourself that question. And perhaps you're coming to some conclusions. I can tell you what I see the Lord doing in my own life, what he's trying to do in me with special force even in recent days. Perhaps it will be of some help to you.

What I see God doing in my own life is crucifying the visionary dreamer in me. What God seems to be grinding into my soul, through difficult circumstances, disappointments and suffering, is this painful realization for me personally: that while visionary dreamers, like me, often make great leaders for God's people, they don't always make the best *lovers of God's people*. You see, what God is teaching me is that the people I'm called to pastor don't want simply to be a part of my vision, they want to be a part of my own heart.

There's a section in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic little book on Christian community entitled *Life Together* that nails this; in fact, it nails me—to the cross of Christ. I'd read this section many times before, and I've always been sensitive to what he says. But I think the Lord has brought this current fiery trial into my life to force me to deal with this underlying issue in my own heart, even though, I might add, I don't think it's necessarily *directly* related to our current situation. Listen to what Bonhoeffer says:

On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image. Certainly serious Christians who are put in a community for the first time will often bring with them a very definite image of what Christian communal life should be, and they will be anxious to realize it. But God's grace quickly frustrates all such dreams. A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an understanding of genuine Christian community. By sheer grace God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks and to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep over us like a wave of rapture. For God is not a God of emotionalism, but the God of truth. Only that community which enters into the experience of this great disillusionment with all its unpleasant and evil appearances begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both. However, a community that cannot bear and cannot survive such disillusionment, clinging instead to its idealized image, when that should be done away with, loses at the same time the promise of a durable Christian community. Sooner or later it is bound to collapse. Every human

idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive. Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.

God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly. They stand adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of the community. They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds the people together. Whatever does not go their way, they call a failure.

Bonhoeffer then applies all of this specifically to pastors and other zealous congregants.

That also applies in a special way to the complaints often heard from pastors and zealous parishioners about their congregations. Pastors should not complain about their congregation, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. Congregations have not been entrusted to them in order that they should become accusers of their congregations before God and their fellow human beings. When pastors lose faith in a Christian community in which they have been placed and begin to make accusations against it, they had better examine themselves first to see whether the underlying problem is not their own idealized image, which should be shattered by God. And if they find that to be true, let them thank God for leading them into this predicament. But if they find that it is not true, let them nevertheless guard against ever becoming an accuser of those whom God has gathered together. Instead, let them accuse themselves of their unbelief, let them ask for an understanding of their own failure and their particular sin, and pray that they may not wrong other Christians. Let such pastors, recognizing their own guilt, make intercession for those charged to their care. Let them do what they have been instructed to do and thank God.

So, brothers and sisters of Calvary Memorial Church, as your pastor, I say to you that I am sorry. I have not loved you in Christ Jesus the way I should. Please forgive me for often loving my own visionary dream more than you. What God is painfully teaching me is that you don't want simply to be a part of my vision, but a part of my heart. God is teaching me that lesson, but it's not coming very quickly or easily, because it is requiring the crucifixion

of the visionary dreamer in me. So please pray for me, that He who has begun a good work in me, may be faithful and just to complete this work in me, for my good, and for your good, and for His glory.

Crucifixion with Christ is the Only Way Forward

Brothers and sisters, we're in the midst of the wilderness. And the way forward is going to be hard. We still have a lot of work to do in the days and weeks ahead.

But, listen to me, turning back isn't the way forward. Going back to Egypt isn't the way to the land of promise. Resorting to the old attachments and patterns of behavior of the past isn't the way to press on toward the future God has for us.

No, the way forward, indeed, the only way forward, is *to embrace the cross of Christ more fully and more freely*. The way forward through the mess we find ourselves in right now is the same way forward the Apostle Paul recommends to the Galatians: "Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are" (4:12).

If we're going to move forward, out of the wilderness of affliction I find myself in, and you find yourself and we as a church find ourselves in, we're going to have to do what Paul is calling the Galatians to do, when they found themselves in a big mess. And that is to imitate Paul: to become like him in his being crucified with Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20).

Imitating the crucified Paul, as he imitates the crucified Christ—that is the way forward for each and every one of us, both in our current situation as a church, but also in every other situation of difficult we find ourselves in. Letting your own desires and ambitions and wishes and dreams and preferences—your very life—be crucified on the cross with Christ, for the good of others, as an expression of the life and love of Christ working in and through you. That's the call of the gospel on my life, on all of our lives. And that's the only way forward as a church.

In preparation for this Sunday's message, I asked the elders and ministry staff if they would send me a passage of Scripture that they believe God would want to speak to this Body during this difficult time in our life together. It was so encouraging to see their choices and read those Scriptures. A number of them sent me Philippians 2:1-11. Oh, there is great wisdom in that choice. For it captures just what we need: the mind of Christ.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant,*

being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Brothers and sisters, having the mind of Christ is the only way forward. The mind of Christ is what I so desperately need as your pastors. And, may I suggest, the mind of Christ is what each and every one of you so desperately needs as well.

So, as we as a church rally together in these difficult days, rather than splinter apart, let us close our service this morning by singing our closing song, "May the Mind of Christ," and let us make this our heartfelt prayer to the Lord, both today and in the days to come.

May the mind of Christ my Savior
Live in me from day to day
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.

May the word of God dwell richly
In my heart from hour to hour
So that all may see I triumph
Only through His power.

May the peace of God my Father
Rule my life in everything
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing.

May the love of Jesus fill me
As the waters fill the sea
Him exalting self abasing
This is victory.

Crucifixion with Christ: Him exalting, self-abasing. This is victory. Amen.

Amen.