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When Plans Change

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Series: Where Glory Dwells
2 Corinthians 1:12-24

BIG IDEA – OUR PLANS CHANGE, BUT GOD'S PROMISES DON'T

All right. That's it. A pretty straightforward picture of what it looks like to be a Christian. Here in Winston-Salem... This is a religious city, so people tend to think, "Here's what it means to be a Christian: I listen to sermons, I sing songs, and I get a free hour of childcare."

That is not what it means to be a Christian. It means to actively, intentionally, explicitly follow Jesus and then look beside you and behind you and go, "I wonder if there's anybody else...my coworkers, my classmates, my friends, my family...whom I could help find and follow Jesus."

The gospel goes forward one relationship and one gospel risk at a time. Here's how it works. You take the risk, and then you trust God with the results. This isn't easy. This is why we need models for ministry. Greg is a model for ministry. We have hundreds of people like that in this church.

Do you want to know what an example is? An example is somebody you look to when you don't know what to do. We need models of what it looks like to be faithful to Christ. If you'll type to or turn to 2 Corinthians, chapter 1, I'm going to meet you there in a few minutes in verse 12. Paul will continue to share his life and be a model for ministry, because Christianity is both taught and caught.

We'll get there in a few minutes, but first I need to tell you one thing I'm really excited about, and it is our men's and women's events next month. This is going to be May 10 for the men, so mark your calendar. This is May 24 for the women. They're both Friday nights.

If you want to know why I'm so excited about this, it's because I saw what God did last year through our men's and women's nights. There's just something about getting the dudes together and having them sing and hear God's Word. There's something about getting the ladies together.

Guys, this year, I'm telling you, we're bringing in the best speakers we could find. Jon Tyson and Jen Wilkin are in town. I hope you guys are excited about this. You may have never heard of Jon Tyson. He's from Australia originally. He has been pastoring in New York City for 20 years. He's writing a book right now on the shadows men fight. He's going to be talking to us.

Jen Wilkin needs no introduction. She is the Oprah for evangelical women...book writing, blog posting, podcasting. You know who she is. Guys, this is not hyperbole, especially for the women. I would plan on showing up early, as early as you can do it. Go to dinner afterward. I'm just telling you guys...

We're not even sure how to put this on social media, because as soon as people find out Jen Wilkin is in the state of North Carolina, they're going to come from Charlotte, and this is not a ministry to North Carolina; this is a ministry to our church. So, we really want you to show up. Bring your friends from your Community Group. It's going to be a significant moment and marker in your life. Let's pray, and then let's get to work.

Lord, do something in the men's lives. Make them better sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers. Do something in the women's lives. Make them stronger wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. Do something unique in the moment as we have someone coming from New York City and someone else coming from Dallas, Texas, to bring your Word, Lord. We pray that it would really influence marriages and families. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right. Have you ever had your plans changed? Of course you have. You're human. This is what happens. Now, sometimes your daily plans change. You're a mom of young kids, and Tommy or Timmy is sick, and plans are changed. That's okay. Sometimes your plans change for the week, but sometimes your plans change for your entire career.

You go into a meeting thinking, "I'm getting promoted" and, no, you're getting fired. Then you have to have a new plan for your life, and you have to pivot. That's okay. Sometimes your plans change for your entire life. You get an inheritance. You're like, "Whoa! New plans." Somebody close to you dies, and you're like, "New plans."

Today I want to talk about Paul's ministry plan. He's going to explain his ministry plan. Let me tell you two principles for planning. You can take these to the bank. Two principles in planning: *always plan with prayer*. How many of us get in trouble in planning because, let's be honest, we weren't really praying?

If you only plan and don't pray, you end up in places and with people, often, that you shouldn't be, and if you only pray and don't plan, then you're probably lazy. You're using the spiritual excuse, "Let go and let God." You're not understanding...yes, God is sovereign, but you're responsible. If your life is a boat, there are two oars. One oar is praying, and one oar is planning. What happens if you only use one of the oars? You go in a circle. Some of you have been there.

The other principle is you *plan in pencil*. You don't plan in pen. You say what James says. "If the Lord wills..." That's what you say. Because you don't know. You're finite and fragile. Someone is going to get sick, and someone else is going to suffer. We know this, guys. Think about just even a family vacation. That's the smallest plan you could do. It's like, "Okay. Could I plan something for one week?" Then you find out last minute the grandparents are coming. You're like, "This changes everything!"

Guys, I want to talk to you today about having a ministry plan. Here's what happened with Paul. Paul had a plan, but things changed. Here's a little more background. The church at Corinth had trust issues with Paul. Have you ever had trust issues? Of course you have. Maybe in your marriage, maybe in your business, or maybe in your church. Trust is very much like momentum. They're like the same thing.

Trust is gained slowly and lost quickly, and trust has to be both given and earned. Organizations, churches, and families move at the speed of trust. So, Paul is trying to regain trust. Think about that. Organizations, families, and churches move at the speed of trust. Have you ever met a church that can't get anything done? Why? Well, the deacons don't trust the elders, the elders don't trust the staff, and the staff doesn't trust the congregation. It's a mess.

Paul is going to rebuild trust by sharing his ministry plan. Let me ask you. Do you have a plan for your life? That's going to be my challenge today. Paul's big idea today is *our plans change, but God's promises don't, but we should still plan*. In fact, the way you know you're serious about your life... This is really something good to know.

You might say, "I know what I want in my life. I want more romance in my marriage." What's your plan? So many people... No, you don't have a plan. "I'd like to be healthier." What's your plan? "I'd like to walk with God." What's your plan? We don't get to control what God does, but this is so cool: you get to control what you'd like

God to do in your life. You get to control what you're planning and expecting and opening yourself up for.

So, what I'm going to give you today is five principles for planning. They're uniquely Christian. You'll see. It's not going to give you some formula. Think of more principles and pillars for your life.

01 MY PLAN IN LIFE IS TO BOAST IN GOD

The first principle... Paul says to them, "My plan is to boast in God. That's the plan for my life." Here, I'll show you. Verse 12:

"For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand—just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you."

What's up with all this boasting? I thought Christians weren't supposed to boast. I thought pride is like the ultimate sin. I was actually reading this passage with my family, doing a little devotional at dinner or breakfast, and I said the word *boast*. Part of what I do is I'm just a keyword preacher. I just bring up words and talk about them.

So I asked my kids, "What's boasting?" My 7-year-old says, "Oh, Dad, it's not good." I said, "Do you know what it means, Elon?" He said, "I have no idea what boasting means." "It doesn't sound good, but I don't know what it means." So, the problem with boasting is... Like almost everything in the Bible, you're supposed to do it, but you're supposed to do it in God's way.

There's good boasting and bad boasting. In how many of our lives, if we could be really honest...? I know church is no place to be honest, but if we could be really honest, what has gotten us in trouble is our plan for our life was self-exaltation. That was the plan in the career. That has been the plan in your relationships.

Here's the thing, guys. We're going to talk about good boasting in a second, but the bad boasting is... Let's just call it *bragging*. Bragging is where you share status-elevating information with others. We really don't like people who do that. I was reading an article this week on bragging. It basically said there are four types of bragging. You can put all bragging into four categories.

First category: the *bare-bones brag*. Most of us are not unaware enough, hopefully (maybe some of us are), or arrogant enough or insecure enough to do the bare-bones brag. The bare-bones brag is when you, for some reason, strangely, just love to share all this positive stuff about yourself so everyone thinks you're so great. We don't really like that.

We tend to do the *one-upmanship brag*, he said. That is among friends. "Oh, really. You shot 80 for the first time in golf. My best is 75." Just a little bit of one-upmanship. He said then there's the *reciprocal brag*. The one-upmanship brag you use with people who are your equals in status, because bragging is all about status. The reciprocal brag you use with people who have more status than you. They share something about themselves, and then you share similar information to say, "I'm at the same status."

Then they said the most popular today (because people know it's not good to brag) is the *humble brag*. Do you know what the humble brag is? It's like when you say, "You know what? I'd love to be there, but my family and I are very busy, and we have courtside tickets to the Duke game. I'm sorry." It's when you say something like, "You know what? I don't play that video game. It's too easy for me." That's the humble brag.

Paul says this. Wouldn't this be awesome if this was your life? Maybe think about it this way. What should you do in planning? First, look up and say, "My desire is to boast in God," to be proudly confident of God, to *glorify* God is how you've probably heard it said before. Here's the interesting thing about Paul. Paul boasted in only two things, big categories. He boasted in what God was doing in Christ, and he boasted in what God was doing in Christians. That's it.

So, Paul is kind of a strange guy. In Galatians 6, he says, "May I never boast except in the cross of Christ," which kind of sounds crazy. Why would somebody boast in crucifixion? Because of what it accomplished: the salvation of sinners. Paul said it changed his whole life. Paul is kind of strange. He says, "I boast..."

By the way, he uses the word *boast* 25 times in 2 Corinthians alone. This is crazy. Later he goes, "I boast in my sufferings." You're like, "Who boasts in their sufferings?" Then here's something that none of us do. Whose social media account is committed to *this*? "I boast in my weaknesses." Paul is strange.

Then, maybe more practically and importantly, Paul would boast in what God was doing in other Christians' lives. I think that's really important, because I think it's hard to know what God is doing in our lives sometimes. I struggle with that. "What is God doing in my marriage? What is God doing in my heart?"

I remember when I first got into full-time ministry. I know it doesn't look like it, but when I first got into full-time ministry, I started to work out. I know that's going to be a surprise to many of you. I had to wonder, "Why am I working out all of a sudden?" It was because in ministry I couldn't measure anything. "Is that person repenting of their sin or not? Are they growing in Christlikeness or not?" I couldn't figure it out, but I could figure out "Can I lift more tomorrow than I did yesterday?"

Here's the principle, guys. A lot of times we don't know how we're doing, and we need someone else to come around and boast about what God is doing in their lives. God gets all the glory, but we get the encouragement. It's like, "Do you realize you're becoming a more generous person? Man, I'm watching the way you deal with your wife and kids, and you're more forgiving and more gentle."

I mean, what would it look like if every Community Group, if every relationship in here was like, "Man, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to try to discover what God is doing in your life, and I'm going to celebrate it so you can see it"? Anyway, that's the first thing. The first thing he says is, "Look up, because my plan is not to boast in myself." That gets us in trouble. "My plan is to boast in God."

02 MY PLANS ARE INFORMED BY MY CONSCIENCE

The second plan... He says, "Okay. After I look up, I look in." He says, "My plan is to be informed by my conscience." Let me show you this. So, he looks out to God, but then he looks in to his conscience. ***"For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience..."***

As soon as you have a plan for your life, a plan for your marriage, a plan for your business, a plan for evangelism, and a plan to disciple your kids, here's the first thing that's going to happen: a lot of trouble, a lot of left turns and right turns, a lot of hills and valleys. What are you going to be able to depend on? You're going to have to have something to lean back on and go, "Am I doing this right?"

If you go public with your faith, you're going to have critics. You're going to have to go, "How am I going to do this?" You have to lean on your conscience. God gave us an internal witness. That's the conscience. God gave us an external witness. That's the Bible. They're supposed to relate. I'll get there in a few minutes.

Our conscience is... Don't think shoulder angel. That's in a cartoon. The conscience is the soul's warning system. Here's what it does. It accuses you when you're doing something wrong, and it approves of you when you're doing something right. This is

why you could take a stand for somebody at work... You could do the right thing and get in trouble at work, and then go home and be like, "I can sleep tonight. It's so strange," because the deepest part of you knows you did the right thing.

What you want to do now... Hopefully it's peacetime in your house. In peacetime, you need to strengthen your conscience. You need to calibrate your conscience to God's Word, because you're going to need it. Basically, one of the ways... I'm not saying we're the greatest here, but one of the ways we made it through COVID was I didn't go against my conscience.

Every week, someone was saying something different or somebody wanted to do something different. There was no way to make it through COVID except to follow my conscience. I had to be able to trust it. Here's an interesting thing about the conscience: everybody's conscience is a little bit different.

There are two principles when it comes to the conscience. The first principle is every Christian's conscience is different. It's called *Christian liberty*. I let you have your conscience, and you let me have my conscience. The second principle of your conscience is to never go against your conscience.

I'm going to talk more about the conscience in a second, but hold on. How many of you are going against your conscience right now in some area of your life? Forget the whole having some big plan for your life and making some kind of big difference. Stop that right now. You need to stop going against your own conscience.

All right. This couple has a horrible marriage. It's a 2 out of 10. Here's what both of you do: stop going against your conscience. I mean, how many of you...? There are things you know you should not do that you keep doing. Golly! If you would just stop doing the things your own conscience tells you to stop doing, it would fix probably half the problems in your life. That's the point of the conscience.

There are three types of consciences, the Bible says. There is the sensitive conscience. Some of you have this. If you grew up in a very religious and moralistic environment, you tend to have a sensitive conscience. I'll give you a passage: 1 Corinthians 8. I'm using the word *sensitive*. Paul uses the phrase *weaker brother*. Here's what Paul says. He's not making fun of them. He says here's what happens.

It's a long story. I can't get into all of the details. Basically, there's some food that has been sacrificed to idols, and Paul is like, "Look. An idol is nothing. You can eat the meat. It's not a big deal." But there were some people whose consciences were so sensitive Paul called them the *weaker brother*. They thought they could only eat vegetables and not eat meat.

Paul basically says you live with the weaker brother in an understanding way. If your conscience is sensitive, you want to strengthen it, but you never want to go against your conscience. There's a reason for this. Here's how your conscience works. The first time you go against it, it says, "No!" Then, if you keep going against it, it says, "No, I wouldn't do that. Okay, fine. Uncle." You'll see this.

The first time you lie to your spouse, it's very difficult to do. You sweat. You get in the other room. You're thinking about it. You wonder if you're going to get caught. If you lie five, six, or seven times, it becomes pretty easy. Cheating on your test, cheating on your taxes... Your conscience will be strongest in the beginning, and it will say, "Do not do this," but if you keep going, it will let you go.

That leads to the second type of conscience. So, Paul says there's a sensitive conscience, and then Paul literally says this. Paul is writing to this young pastor named Timothy, and he says, "Hey, Timothy. There are going to be these crazy people that are going to show up in your church, and their consciences are seared like a hot iron."

So, there are other people... This is probably more common because of the culture we live in. Their conscience lets them do a bunch of things Scripture says they shouldn't. Like, why do we care about the laws in our nation? Or maybe say it this way. Why do people want things to be legal? Why do they want the government to legalize things? So their conscience won't condemn them. That's actually technically one of the reasons.

When something is legal, you're going, "Phew. Okay. My government, the leaders of the land say this is okay, so this is okay, even though I know it's not okay." The seared conscience happens... This is why people sometimes are like, "I can't believe what I'm looking at. I can't believe what I'm doing. I can't believe how much I'm drinking. I can't believe how much pain medication I'm taking."

It's like, okay, we know how you got here. There's a lot of grace. We know how you got here. You got here not overnight, but over time, by saying "No" to your conscience. What we want to have is a Spirit-filled conscience. It's a conscience that's calibrated to God's Word. When the conscience is working rightly, it fills the gap between what God's Word says and where you're failing.

Your conscience, connected to grieving the Holy Spirit, should lead you to repentance. That's how the conscience works. The conscience is so powerful, guys. When I'm teaching, I'm trying to talk to your conscience. That's what I'm trying to do, if you've ever wondered. That's why most of the time I say things like, "You know this." You *do* know this.

Well, then how do we build the conscience? Let me give you a paradigm and practices to build your conscience, because for some of you it's too sensitive, and for some of you it's too seared. No conscience is perfect. So, here's what you do. You find biblical truth, and you create personal convictions, and that's how you build your conscience. I'll give you an idea.

A biblical truth is binding on all Christians everywhere all the time. Let me give you a couple of practical ones. This will be helpful. If you get this, it's really helpful. Biblical truth: "Do not get drunk." As much as you may want there to be, there's no asterisk next to it with a picture of you on the back of the Bible, saying, "She's the exception."

Then you have to go, "Well, then what would be my personal conviction for me and my family based on this biblical truth?" I know a lot of people say, "I don't want to ever have to have a last drink, so I'll never have a first drink." Okay. The teetotaler mentality. And "Hey, I don't want it to be a temptation. I don't want it to be confusing to certain people, and my dad or my grandpa or my grandmother [*this*]." Totally fine.

Other people might have a different conviction. "You know what? I'm going to drink on the holidays and at celebrations." Other people might have another conviction. "I never drink alone." Other people have another conviction. "I only have one or two drinks when I drink." Okay.

Do you notice how the same biblical truth can inform someone's conscience to have different personal convictions? We have to get this, guys, because the principle of the conscience is one of the foundational principles for the church to have unity in the midst of diversity.

Okay. So, home education. The Bible says the parents are primarily responsible for the education of their children. I can give a ton of verses. Biblical truth. Personal conviction might be homeschool, private Christian school, public school while being heavily invested, or university model. Who knows? There are so many options.

Here's where churches get weird and Christians get weird and goofy: when they try to make their personal conviction somebody else's biblical truth. Here's what I've found, though: the strongest, most mature Christians I know (I don't think there are any exceptions to this) have the most personal convictions, but they're also so gracious to anybody who would be different.

Maybe the first place to start with a personal conviction would be to take the biblical truth that you're to meditate on God's Word day and night. That's a biblical truth. What's your personal conviction to get God's Word in your heart? Is it Bible Recap? Is

it Bible in a Year? Is it a psalm a day? Is it a book study? The principle is I build my conscience by creating personal convictions based on biblical truth. It's so helpful.

03 MY PLAN WAS AND IS TO BE THE GRACE OF GOD IN YOUR LIFE

So, Paul says, "I look up. I want to boast in God." Then Paul says, "I look in because I need to be informed by my conscience." Then Paul says, "I look out. I want to be the grace of God in your life." This is exciting. This is really interesting. I want you to see this. Turn with me to verse 15. *"Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace."* Whoa!

Paul goes, "I want to tell you why I'm coming to meet with you." There are a lot of different reasons we meet with people, why we schedule lunch or get a cup of coffee or go to their house. If we're honest, sometimes our motives are for ourselves. "Maybe this is a good networking opportunity. Maybe I can get something out of this. Maybe there's some quid pro quo in all of this."

Probably none of us have ever had a perfectly pure motive in our whole lives, but I love what Paul says. Paul says, "I want to tell you my motive. My motive is to come to you so you can have a second experience of grace." I was reading that this week and thinking, "What is a second experience of grace?"

Well, it's different than a first experience of grace. You can't have a second experience of grace if you've never had a first experience of grace. The first experience of grace is when you become a Christian. We saw this at Easter, a couple dozen people raising their hands across our services, receiving Christ.

The first experience of grace is when you welcome Jesus Christ into your life as your Lord, Savior, and treasure. It's when you transfer trust from yourself to Jesus and believe that what he did 2,000 years ago counts for you. Then there's a second experience of grace. Now here's my question...*How many experiences of grace do you need?* Answer: as many as you can get. Right? That should be the answer.

Where do you need the grace of God in *your* life? The grace of God is not just the forgiving grace of God, although that's very powerful. That's the beginning of it. That's grace 101. The grace of God, by the way, is a fundamental human need. Most people think the fundamental human needs are food, water, and shelter. They're close. It's food, water, shelter, and grace.

Grace is the fundamental need of the human soul. We need to be forgiven. This is what we long for. We long for someone to know us as we really are and forgive us and love us, and that's the grace of God in Christ. There's the forgiving grace of God, and then there's the transforming, empowering grace of God, the grace of God that the Bible says teaches us to say "No" to unrighteousness.

Where do you need the grace of God in your life, really? A lot of people need the grace of God in their marriage. "I need a second experience of the grace of God in my marriage. That would be amazing." People need to experience the grace of God in some fight with sin. They've made peace with sin. They've been managing their sin life, and they're like, "I need the grace of God." People need it in their stewardship and in their finances.

I really want you to do this, because the Bible says it, and I want to create a church like this. Paul says, "I view myself as being the grace of God in other people's lives." Isn't that amazing? Guys, listen. The people in our lives who we're the closest to and we could show the most grace to we tend to show the least grace to.

No one can be the grace of God to a husband like his wife. No one can be the grace of God to a wife like her husband. No one can be the grace of God to kids like their parents. No one can be the grace of God to parents like their kids. What is wrong with us that the very people we could show the most grace to we don't?

Paul basically says this. "Here's my aim. I want to show up, and I want to think about how I can be the grace of God in your life." I want to teach you a very helpful principle. I think it's going to make sense. Give me one second. It's going to sound confusing at first. Here's the principle. It's a psychological principle. It's that whatever you aim at in life determines what appears to you. I'll prove it to you.

Say you're a single girl and you really want to get married. It's a good thing. Your aim is to find a suitor. What is every single man? What does he appear? A potential date or maybe not a date. You're like, "Eh, not him." I'll give you another example. Say a guy is in sales. I know many of you are in sales. There's nothing wrong with that.

Say he's in sales, and he's new in sales. His wife is staying home. He has to make some money, so he gets what my dad calls *commission breath*. Do you know what I'm talking about? This can happen with used cars salesmen. This can happen with a realtor. This can happen with a life insurance guy.

If you have to make a lot of money, and you have to do this, and you're starting out... What is everybody to somebody in sales? They'll walk into church and think, "Oh my goodness. Who here could I sell something to?" Because whatever you aim at

determines what appears to you. Someone who's in bondage to lust... What is every person of the opposite sex to them? A potential sexual object.

Have you ever met somebody who just loves money in general? What is everybody to them? I've met people like this. They are unbelievably fascinated with how much people make. "Well, how much does he make? How do they afford that house? How did they get into that country club? How do they send their kids to that school?"

It's like, "Dude, it's so interesting that you would see that family that way. You would literally see the family, and you'd go on Zillow to figure out how much their house was. What's wrong with you? Everything in your life is about money is what's wrong with you."

So, that's the critique. Here's the encouragement: you could aim differently. Just try this for a week. Aim at being the grace of God in your family's life or your friend's life, and watch a bunch of things appear to you. Just try it for today. Go home and think, "Today I will be the grace of God in my family's life," and then ask God, "How could I be the grace of God in my family's life?"

Here's what will happen. It'll be amazing. A bunch of ideas will appear in your mind that have never been there before. Why? Because you've never aimed there. You've been aiming at boasting in yourself or something like that.

So, Paul says, "I want to be the grace of God." In fact, here's what he says. Verse 16: ***"I wanted to visit you..."*** Remember? They said, "Paul doesn't want to visit us." Look at what he says. ***"I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia..."***

"Guys, you didn't think I wanted to visit you? I wanted to visit you twice. In fact, I wanted to have you send me on my way to Judea. I wanted you to partner with me in the gospel." He says, ***"Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No."***

Let's really quickly jump back up to verse 12, because he's talking about how he did ministry. Look at what he says here. ***"For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved..."*** By the way, that's the language of a pattern of behavior. ***"...in the world with simplicity..."***

That word *simplicity* does not mean minimalism. Here's what Paul means: the opposite of duplicity. "I was single-minded. My life was about one thing." Look. ***"...and***

godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you." Paul goes, "Guys, when it comes to me, what you see is what you get."

I want to encourage you. There's so much freedom in saying, "I'm going to have one life." That's what Paul is saying. "I'm not going to have a travel life that's different than my home life. I'm not going to have a family life that's different than my work life. I'm not going to have a church life that's different than my vacation life. I'm just going to be the same person in every place." That's basically what Paul is saying.

04 MY PLAN IS CONNECTED TO GOD'S PROMISES

Then he says this. This is really cool. So, he says, "I want to boast in God. I want to follow my conscience. I want to be the grace of God to you." Then here's his fourth plan. These are just pillars. These are anchors for him. The fourth thing he says is, "I want to be like Jesus. My plan in life is to imitate Jesus." I'll show you this. It takes a second. It's a little confusing when you first read it, but I'll show you this.

"For the Son of God..." Paul can't help himself. He just loves to talk about Jesus. *"...Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I..."* "The main point and person of our message was Jesus Christ." *"...was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes."*

Why is Paul telling them this? Here's what Paul is saying: "Guys, I want you to know my motives were pure because I'm trying to live like Jesus." He says, "Jesus is always Yes, so his 'Yes' is 'Yes' and his 'No' is 'No,' so I want you to know that my 'Yes' is 'Yes' and my 'No' is 'No.'"

He's basically saying something we've forgotten in the American church today. It's that I would like my life and my ministry and my family or my work... I'd like it all to say something about Jesus and communicate true things about Jesus. See, if you don't know this, this is a Bible-believing, evangelical, Protestant church.

I don't think you can overemphasize this, but in churches like ours, we talk a ton about faith in Jesus Christ. We'll call you to believe. We'll sing songs about believing in what Christ has done in his life, death, and resurrection. And I believe all this. We'll talk about how faith unites us to Christ, and we'll talk about how faith links us and changes us. I believe in all that, but we've forgotten something.

It's interesting. In 2,000 years of church history, the church has dealt with and talked about and wrestled with everything. I think in this moment in the life of our church or

the church of America, what we have forgotten is what theologians have called the *imitation of Christ*. When was the last time you thought, "How would Jesus live if he was living my life? What would Jesus Christ do if he was in my marriage? How would Jesus Christ do this job and career if he had it?" We don't ask that question anymore.

About 25 years ago, there was a really popular bracelet...some of you may still have it on...the "WWJD?" bracelet. Remember these? We're going to give you one when you leave. (I'm just kidding.) I had one for a season. People have different perspectives on this. Some people think it's cheesy. The more I think about it, I think it might be the deepest question a person could ask if they're sincerely asking it.

"What would Jesus Christ do if he was living my life?" Here's the honest truth: we don't want to ask that question because we don't want to answer it. "What would Jesus do if he had as much money as I do?" You don't want to answer that question. So we're in the dark. We're supposed to imitate, guys, and the only way to imitate someone is to spend a lot of time with them.

So, as you spend time in prayer and spend time in God's Word and read the Gospels and see who Christ is, you should have more and more of a desire to imitate. Kids imitate their parents. Friends imitate each other as they grow up. People imitate celebrities all the time. Imitation is the highest form of flattery.

What would it look like for you to take seriously, "What does it look like for me to try to live like Jesus as I live my life?" Anyway, Paul is saying, "That's what I'm trying to do, guys, so you can trust me. When I need to repent, I'm going to repent, but the direction of my life and the pattern of my life is to follow Jesus."

Look at what he says. ***"For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen..."*** Basically, he says, "The promises of God lead to us praying." All of the promises of God are "Yes" in Christ; therefore, we pray. ***"...we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit..."*** There's the Trinitarian nature of all this. ***"...in our hearts as a guarantee."***

Basically, Paul points us to the promises of God. He says, "Look. I'm going to make promises, and I'm going to try my best. I'm going to keep my word, but I don't know if I'm going to be able to keep every promise I ever make. What if I promise I'm going to come back and I get put in jail or killed?" So he points them to the promises of God.

You can think about the whole Bible... It's a big book, I know, but you can think about the whole Bible as command and promise, command and promise. Open up your Old

Testament. Outside of describing something, all it is is command and promise, command and promise.

Paul is saying something really profound that maybe we take for granted in the church. He's saying all of the promises of the Old Testament have found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He's what's called the *hermeneutical*, meaning interpretive key of the entire Old Testament. God said he'd save us, God said he'd forgive us, God said he'd take us home, and God said he'd deal with our sins. He did all of it in Christ.

05 MY PLAN IS TO WORK WITH YOU FOR YOUR JOY IN GOD

Here's what he says at the end. This is what I really want us to spend a few minutes on. I really want us to get this. Look at verse 23, the final part of Paul's plan. ***"But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth."***

Paul looks back now and goes, "I couldn't see it through the windshield, but I can see it through the rearview mirror. It actually worked out well that I couldn't visit you when I wanted to." Basically, Paul is going to say, "Because I was angry, and I wouldn't have dealt with you the way I should have dealt with you. I'm in a lot better place now, so God is using all of this for your good."

Then here it is, guys. Here's where we have to camp out before we close. ***"Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith."*** I don't know that I've ever said this before, but I think, more than maybe any other verse in the Bible, this could be a life verse for some of you. You don't have to have a life verse. A lot of people do have a life verse. They have a verse in the Bible that goes, "This is a controlling, defining sentence or passage or parable for me."

Paul basically gives a description of Christian ministry, which is also a description of parenting. He gives an incredible description. First he says what we shouldn't do. He basically says, "Guys, this is how to do ministry wrong. This is how to be a bad Community Group leader. This is how to be a bad dad. This is how to be a bad pastor." He says, "I'll tell you how you do it. You lord it over them."

How many of you are a little tyrant in your home? You're like a little dictator. You use your authority, and you use your influence, and you just put it on people to get things done. The first thing about lording it over... This is good to know about lording it over

people: it doesn't work. Have you ever tried to lord something over your wife? She's not going to put up with that.

Whenever you try to lord over people, basically it makes them want to do the opposite unless they absolutely have to because you're their parent or their boss and there are going to be consequences. Then they will do the least amount possible just so you'll leave them alone.

So, you need to know that lording it over people doesn't work. Jesus warned against lording it over. He says to the disciples, "Guys, don't be like the Pharisees and the scribes who lord their authority over people." He says they give people a bunch of burdens and don't ever lift them.

What I'm surprised at, and maybe I shouldn't be surprised at... I'm not here to call out any one name or anything. This is a big issue now with pastors. It used to be if somebody was out of ministry you were like, "All right. It must have been a financial or sexual compromise of some sort." That certainly still happens, but what I'm seeing more with the podcasts that are coming out, with the stories that hit the news... It's about a domineering pastor.

I remember reading one story. On a baptism Sunday, he preaches, calls for baptisms, goes backstage, and screams at his campus pastor for 15 minutes with words I wouldn't be able to say out loud here. We're all inconsistent, but you wonder, "What's going on there? What's broken in someone's heart?"

In the Christian life, there are always three temptations to go wrong in Christian leadership. There's *compromise*. How do you get there? Well, you get there by going against your conscience. I won't revisit that. We talked about it. Then there's *coasting*. We talked about that last week. I know a lot of pastors who coast. It's like, "Okay. Air-conditioned job. I get to be in my study all day. I get to eat lunches with people. This is fun." Coasting.

The temptation to coast is to have a saved soul and a wasted life. We talked about that last week. The third temptation is to *control*. Paul says, "Guys, there's a better way." What if you work with people for their joy? What if from now on...? I think what Paul is doing here is describing what it looks like to be the grace of God in people's lives.

If when I said earlier "Be the grace of God in someone's life" you said, "Kyle, that sounds kind of nice and romantic, but how?" here's the answer: you work with them for their joy. What if the mindset you had was like, "You know what? You could be

more joyful in God, and I could help"? Actually, here's the second part of that: "And nothing would make me more happy than to do that." Wow!

Is there anything better than having someone in your life go, "Dude, I will work with you for your joy. You're too happy in your sin, and I'm going to work with you for your joy. You love money too much; I'm going to come alongside you to work with you for your joy. You're about to give up in your marriage; I'm coming to work with you for your joy." Paul understood that joy takes work.

Guys, we're trying. Every Sunday (and I'm probably going to feel this the whole letter), I just get up here and am like, "Oh, God, how do you build a church like this?" It's one thing to get people to come to your Weekender and get in Community Groups. That's great. How do you get people to be workers for joy? Because it's going to take work.

I'm not trying to make this about me, but every Monday... I'm never ahead in sermon planning, just for the record, so every Monday, just like *your* job, I have to start all over. I'm looking at a blank screen, and sometimes I'm having a pity party for myself. I shouldn't be. I'm committed from now on... Do you know what I'm doing when I'm in my study by myself? I'm working for the joy of this church. That's it.

If you're a Community Group leader... I know you have to put an hour or two in. What if you were saying, "I'm working for the joy of my Community Group"? I mean, that is so incredible. What if you're going to meet someone, and they're a little difficult, and you have to help her out, and she has a difficult marriage? You go, "I don't know. I'm going to work for their joy."

I'll tell you how to do it. You have to think four things when you're doing this. The first thing you have to think about (some of you are going to have to think about this for yourself) is... *Where is this person spiritually? Are they a believer? Are they not a believer? Are they a young believer?*

Then there's a deeper question, which is... *Why are they there spiritually?* That's the pastoral, compassionate question. I heard a story one time. Imagine this. A guy was addicted to Diet Coke. He was drinking 10 Diet Cokes a day. His friend, who was trying to help him, just yelled at him one day. Like, he tried to lord over him.

He was like, "Dude, get rid of the Diet Coke! It's so stupid that you're addicted to something like Diet Coke." The guy said, "You know what? I never told you. I started drinking this when my brother died. He loved Diet Coke. I started drinking it. I got addicted." The guy was like, "Oh my gosh. I knew where you were. I didn't know why you were there."

The third thing is...*Where could they be?* Some people have never dreamed about their lives. They've never thought it could be any different. You come alongside and go, "It could be different." Then the next one is...*What is their next step?* That's why he says, "Let me work with you." What you say in Christian community is "Let's pick a step small enough that you actually could take it and you *would* take it and you know you *should* take it, and then I'm going to do it with you."

If you'll bow your heads and close your eyes, we're just going to pray this over our church, that we would be workers for joy, that we would be the grace of God for people, that we would not go against our consciences. We're not playing church.

Lord, would you help us? Everybody in this room could be more joyful in you than they are. Some people are just depressed and anxious. They need someone to say, "I'll work with you for your joy. I'll come alongside you." Other people are finding some joy in some things they shouldn't be. They need a Jesus who's better than their sin and bigger than their suffering.

Lord, I just want to thank you for our Community Group leaders. I want to thank you for our elders. I want to thank you for our staff, people who uniquely wake up and think all day long about working for the joy of this church. Lord, I pray this church would be the happiest group of people in Winston-Salem because our joy would be in the Lord and we would be committed to working in the lives of others that they might be happy in Christ as well. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.