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Different to Make a Difference

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Series: Grace & Grit  
2 Corinthians 6

**BIG IDEA – WORK WITH GOD, NOT AGAINST HIM**

Two Cities Church, I have something exciting and special to share with you this morning. I've been waiting a few months to talk about this. See, we are a both/and church, not an either/or church. We're all about both/and. We want to be strategic and Spirit-led. We want to be planned and prayerful. We want to be focused and flexible.

A lot of times (hear this charitably and humbly), by the grace of God, for the glory of God, it feels like as a church we're making things happen, we're pushing back darkness. It's exciting. There are other times where it feels like things are happening *to* us. I want to tell you today about something that's happening *to* us.

A lot of things in this church, by the way, have happened *to* us. I remember, we were a year old as a church, and we went down... Many of you were at our Northwest Boulevard Campus, which is now our student campus. Those are the buildings that look like a Crate & Barrel, if you can't remember. Anyway, when we first looked at them, they were in such horrible condition you needed a tetanus shot just to look at them.

I remember going there, and I'm nervous. I'm a new pastor. Our church has no money. We don't have that many people. We don't have much history in the city. We go and meet one of the owners of these two warehouses. He's a business guy, and I'm trying to talk about the church in business terms. I'm like, "We have an entrepreneurial spirit," you know, all that kind of stuff. I didn't know what he knew.

I was like, "Hey, there's this church (and churches help other churches) in Raleigh-Durham, and they helped us. There's a pastor there named JD. Anyway, we're from

that church." He said, "Really? I just finished reading JD's book." I said, "Thank you, Lord." That was the beginning of a relationship with one of the owners.

Honestly, churches don't get in permanent locations in two years. It doesn't happen...unless it happens *to you*. Guys, something is happening to us in a place that I wouldn't have thought. Something is happening to us in Lexington, North Carolina. Some of you are like, "Lexington." Let me tell you about it.

It's interesting. We're having people drive a long distance to get to our church, and that's not a good long-term strategy for anybody, because "come and see" evangelism, the ability to bring your friends... *You* may drive 30 minutes because you love our church. Your lost friends won't. And "age and stage" ministries. You know, being involved in a student ministry if you live 40 minutes away? Good luck.

So, here's what we're finding. All of these people started coming from Statesville and Mount Airy, but especially from Lexington. Here's the thing. I want you to hear this. This is really cool. They love our church, but they love their city. They love the preaching, they love the worship, they love the mission, they love the vision, they love the values, they love the Community Groups, but they love their city.

So, one of them came to me one day and said, "Can we start a Community Group in Lexington?" I thought, "Well, that's fine. We have Community Groups all over the place." He said, "Yeah, but I'm hoping it becomes more. I'm hoping eventually we have a Two Cities Campus down there, an extension and expression of our church down there." I said, "Well, great. We'll see what happens."

About a year or two later, he calls us back and says, "We've multiplied. We now have three Community Groups with over 50 adults in them, and we really want you guys to bring an expression and extension of Two Cities to Lexington." So, I played the game I like to play with people, which is, "Tag, you're it." Okay. Great. Then he calls back a few weeks later. "I found a building."

Guys, we have a building. I mean, we're leasing it on Sundays. We have three Community Groups with 50 people down in Lexington. I have one playbook. I don't have a lot of plays in my playbook. We are going to build a Lexington launch team. I know there are already 50 of you. You're already down there, but there are a lot of you... Maybe you're listening to me online and you live in Lexington or closer to Lexington.

Maybe you're in our church and you're like this one guy. I was talking to one of the security guys, and I asked him, "How did you get a part of our church?" "Oh, [blah, blah, blah]. We live in Lexington." I said, "You're in Lexington? Are you in one of our Community Groups in Lexington?" He goes, "You have Community Groups in

Lexington?" I thought, "How many people in our church don't even know what's happening down there?"

Guys, we're building a Lexington launch team. These are people who are going to be all in with their time, talent, and treasure to help us launch, as we're going to start calling it, a *Lexington community gathering* this September. More details to come. We're going to have an interest meeting at the end of this month. Don't worry. If you're from Lexington, we know who you are. We'll be giving you an email. We have your information. We'll be getting in touch.

I'm very excited about this. Listen. Maybe God has put it on some of your hearts to help us launch this. It's an experiment. The pace of it will, in large part, depend on all of us here, but we are very excited. If you're thinking about being a part of this, it's not very often that you get to start something. It's very exciting to start something.

The reason our church is what it is today is in large part to our original launch team. So, I hope you'll prayerfully consider, if you live in Lexington or closer to Lexington, to be a part of this, and then, what we're doing in preparation... This isn't just for our Lexington people; this is for everybody.

We're going to be having a prayer night on June 19. I'm specifically going to be here, leading us through the vision and values of our church and praying those over our family, our church, and our city. So, let's pray, and then we're going to start a brand-new series in the same book, *Grace & Grit*, in the book of 2 Corinthians. Let's pray.

Lord, I am excited, and I just want to say, "Thank you" to the lay leaders in our church who have made this happen and the people who love the gospel and love our church but love their city. Lord, we know this is true. The church is most effective when the church is most local. We want to live, learn, work, play, and worship in the same areas.

So, I pray you would bless this as people step out to be a part of this launch team. I have seen, in the history of planting churches and being a part of that, that launch teams uniquely get connected to one another. People on launch teams are uniquely deepened and developed in ways they otherwise wouldn't be. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right, guys. Do you remember Take Your Kid to Work Day? I looked this up because I thought maybe this was just a northern thing. I thought maybe this was a Pittsburgh thing. I thought maybe this was a Pine-Richland School District thing. It's not. In fact, it is a national day of the year. I know, so is Doughnut Day, but listen up for a second.

The fourth Thursday of every April (You missed it. I'm sorry. Put it on your calendar for next year) is Take Your Kid to Work Day. I remember this. Now, I have a great dad. I love him. He never took me to work. I don't know why. I'm in counseling for that. No, I'm just kidding. But I do remember being in elementary school (that's really who this is for), and they'd say, "Hey, guys, it's Take Your Kid to Work Day this week, so I know some of you won't be here."

You took your kid to work because, I mean, most of us don't know what our dad or mom does for a living, especially when we're in elementary school. We're like, "I don't know what they do. They disappear for eight hours. I don't know." What you did not do when you took your kids to work... They didn't work with you. Right? You didn't take your third grader to work and they jumped into accounting or law with you. They watched what you did, because if they would have worked with you, it would have been a disaster.

Working with your kids is never efficient. Have you ever unloaded a dishwasher with a 4-year-old? If you don't struggle with anxiety, you will during that moment. "Don't poke yourself. Don't drop that. That's Grandma's fine china." Here's the thing, guys. I want you to understand this. Why do you work with your kids? Never because it's efficient. You work with your kids because it deepens the relationship and develops them.

In 2 Corinthians 6, we're told God works with us. Why would he do this? To deepen the relationship and develop us. It's so humbling. Part of the humility of God is that (I'm careful with the language on this, but hear this out; it's hard to say these theological categories with words) he would willingly limit himself to primarily working through his church. It's unbelievable, but that's what Paul says. I want you to see this today.

Verse 1 of chapter 6: ***"Working together with him..."*** That's amazing. *Him* is God. ***"...then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain."*** Here's what I want you to understand. Because we live in Winston-Salem, because there are 516 churches, because there's a religious spirit everywhere in this city, I want you to understand that Christians do not primarily work for God.

I mean, we *do* work for God. He *is* our Master; he *is* our Lord...all that. But what's unique in Christianity is we don't work *for* God, like, "God, I'm going to do a bunch of things, and I hope the good outweighs the bad and you'll let me into heaven when I die," or whatever. No, we work *with* God.

Here's the big idea for the whole sermon. I'm going to unpack it all, but basically, here's what I'm going to ask you to do today. I'm going to ask you to start working with God and not against him. How much of your life are you like, "I'm doing things I

know are wrong and stupid and unhelpful and exactly the opposite of what the Bible says, and I know that a lot of times I just make things worse"? It's like, "Well, stop doing that." You can do that today, and I'll show you how.

I love this, because he says we're supposed to work *with* God. Listen. There are two moves in the Christian life. The first move is "God wants to have a relationship with me." That's when you realize, "Oh my goodness! Jesus Christ died on the cross, not just for people but for me, and Jesus died to remove every barrier and obstacle so I could have a relationship with God. I'm forgiven so I could have a relationship with God."

Then you read the Bible and go, "Wow! This is how God talks to me." Then you pray and go, "Wow! This is how I talk to God." It's this dynamic relationship. That's step one. Many Christians never get to step two. Step two is "God wants to use me in the lives of other people." Do you see what Paul says there? He says, "Working with him, I appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain." In other words, "Don't miss out."

By the way, every one of my sermons is "Don't miss out." Like, "Go to the Weekender. Get in a Community Group. Get on a serving team. Live on mission. Have a 'one.' Don't miss out." He says we work with God. Basically, what we have to do is to get in line and ask, "Where is God working?" The famous Henry Blackaby quote... He's gone with the Lord now. He said we want to discover "Where is God working, and how can I join him?"

Then Paul says, "I appeal to you to do this with us." Guys, let's build a church where we have gospel partnerships, not just Christian friendships. Too many of you are settling for Christian friendship, and it started in middle school. Mom and Dad said, "You'd better not be doing those bad things," and you thought, "That's good. I don't want to do the bad things. I don't want to get drunk and break commandments. I don't want that to be my middle school, high school, and college years."

So then you thought, "I need to find other nice people like me who don't do bad things." Including my time in college, and then my time in college ministry, I spent 14 years on a college campus. The average Christian on a college campus does not have gospel partnerships; they have Christian friendships. They have people to not do bad things with on Friday night. God wants more for you.

I remember the first time I really felt like I had a gospel partnership. I was a freshman in college at Elon University. My mentor/discipler at the time, and my good buddy, said to me, "Kyle, you guys are Christians. You guys are friends. What if you lived in the freshman dorm again?" You never want to hear those words in that

order...*freshman dorm again*. If you've ever lived in a freshman dorm, you want to do it one time, and then you want to get to an apartment off campus as soon as possible.

I remember he said, "Why don't you guys just be Christians but with gospel intentionality in the dorm. My goodness, incarnational ministry. John 1:14. Go live among them. Be salt and light in the dorm." That was the first gospel partnership I ever had, because we knew, "The only reason we're living in this dorm and the only reason we're roommates and don't have our own rooms is we're trying to do a gospel partnership to reach this."

Guys, aren't the best marriages gospel partnerships? Marriage is hard, I know. I talk about marriage, and you guys are like, "I wish we could just be friends. We're not even friends." I know that's hard. It's interesting. Most of us have several decades left. It would be something for you to aim at.

I had this meeting a couple of weeks ago. I don't do a lot of early morning meetings, but this was a meeting. It got scheduled. It was at 6:00 in the morning with this group of guys. We're catching up, and the one guy is in his early 60s. I want to encourage you. This is someone in our church. Early 60s, newly retired. He shows up at this 6:00 a.m. meeting. He was just on vacation, seeing the grandkids.

He came back, and he said, "Man, my vacation was so incredible. My wife and I memorized this passage of Scripture together. We've been talking about it." Then he said this. I was already impressed. "And we studied this book together on vacation." I was like, "Whoa. This is awesome." He wasn't even bragging. He said this to us. I was like, "Whoa." Remember, this was a 6:00 a.m. meeting.

He said, "My wife and I have been getting up early in the morning and praying together, so we got up this morning, and we prayed together for 30 minutes before I left, discerning what God has for us in retirement." I was like, "It's 6:00 a.m. and you live 20 minutes away. So, you and your wife were up and praying at 5:00 in the morning."

Aren't the best families gospel partnerships? I know it's tough. It's fun to watch your kids play sports, and we want them to get into good colleges. It's hard enough to have a good relationship with your kids over time and all that, but every once in a while we see people... Here's what happens in our church. I know you can't all do this, but we've had some families go...

They haven't said it exactly like this. They haven't said, "We don't have gospel partnership in our family," but they've said some version of, which every family feels at some point, "Are we really that Christian? If they were going around and arresting

Christians, would there be enough evidence to convict us?" They go, "Not really. We're kind of a Netflix family. Our hope is where everybody else's hope is."

So, we've had some families say, "You know what we need? We need to go on a mission trip together. Both of us are taking PTO, because we can't do this here. We can't figure it out here. We have to go somewhere else for a week and see if we can figure this out and maybe get through all the awkwardness of actually praying together and doing mission together and being intentional together, and maybe, by God's grace, we'll come back and be a different family."

Guys, I want us to have gospel partnerships. Don't settle for Christian friendships. Paul says, "Don't receive the grace of God in vain." Do you see that at the end? You know, you read passages of Scripture, and you go, "Is that possible?" Because other places, you read about the grace of God... This is why it takes the whole Bible to make the whole Christian.

You read about the grace of God, and you're like... It hits you, and you're like, "Whoa! That was the grace of God." But it looks like, here, I'm able to receive it in vain. What does that mean? Literally, to receive it and waste it. Guys, we waste a lot of things. Some of you are wasting your singleness right now. Some of you are wasting your retirement right now. Some of you are wasting your money right now. Some of you are wasting your time. We waste things all the time.

Paul says, in some weird way, we can waste grace. Grace can somehow bounce off us. Do you know who I think this happens to most likely? I mean, many of us have been churching our whole lives. This city is overchurched and underreached. Our middle schoolers and high schoolers... Man! My fear is they've been inoculated with just enough Christianity to soothe their consciences.

Here's what Paul is saying, which is what the church has known for 2,000 years. Not everybody who comes to church believes. In a weird way, some people think they're Christians and they're not. So, Paul says we want to work with him, and we want to not receive the grace of God in vain.

Okay. This is where we're going to go. He tells us four things we need to do if that's going to be true. If you're spiritually alive, if the Holy Spirit is in you, hopefully you're saying, "I'd like to work with God. I'd like to not waste the grace of God in my life." Well, let me give you the four things.

## **01 WE NEED A THEOLOGY OF TODAY**

The first is we must have a theology of today. Look at this. I want you to see this. Second Corinthians 6. This is amazing. ***"For he says..."*** By the way, *he* is God. Paul is quoting God speaking in the book of Isaiah. That's why there are quotation marks around it and it's italicized.

***"For he says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."*** This is so awesome. I want you to notice that Paul is quoting Isaiah 49. It's part of the servant chapters of the book of Isaiah, a very famous part of the book that the Jewish people would know about. That's neat, but that's not what I want to show you.

Before he quotes that Old Testament passage, which was written hundreds of years before Paul pens this... Do you see the three words right before it? ***"For he says..."*** Now hold on. This is big. Sometimes big things are in little verses. It doesn't say, "For he said..." But he did say it in the past. No, no, no. What God has said he's always saying. This is so amazing. This can change your devotional life.

God speaks in the present tense. Here's the whole idea. The Bible is timeless, so it's always timely. Here's what I'm asking you: What is God telling you to do? Or maybe the better question is...*What has God told you to do that you have not yet obeyed?* If you want to transform your devotional life... The key to the devotional life is not to get through *The Bible Recap* in a year, obviously.

The point of a devotional life is saying, "God, would you please speak to me?" "Speak, for your servant is listening" has been the cry of the church. The problem is not that God is not speaking; it's that we've not been listening. Listen. The fundamental first truth about God is Genesis 1. ***"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. [...] And God said..."*** Okay. What are the two fundamental truths about God? He exists and he speaks.

I want you to see something important. Let's go back to it. Here's what it says. ***"For he says, 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.'"*** Here it is. ***"Behold..."*** That means, "Look. Listen. This is important." ***"...now is the favorable time..."***

Then he says it again, as if you didn't hear him. ***"...behold..."*** You don't normally get two *beholds*, but there it is, *behold* again. ***"...now is the day of salvation."*** Here's what I mean by having a theology of today: What do you need to do right now? What do you need to confess? What do you need to repent of? Who do you need to forgive?

There are many reasons you have to have a theology of today, but here's the main one: you'll do anything tomorrow; it's today you have a problem with. Right?



Tomorrow you'll stop looking at that stuff. Tomorrow you'll confess it. Tomorrow you'll eat healthy and exercise. Probably not. Here's the problem with tomorrow: it never comes. You wake up, and you're like, "It's still today." It never comes.

So, what does it mean to receive the grace of God in vain? To think, "I'll do it later." There are two problems, theologically, with that. First is that tomorrow never comes (I already told you about that), but the second is sin hardens our hearts. So, we think, "Oh, man..." I saw this on the college campus. I would talk to students. Normally, if they had a Christian background...

They didn't say it this bluntly. They would say something like, "Well, I'm young, and I'm healthy, and there are a lot of women on this campus" or "There are a lot of men on this campus, and it is time for me to sow my wild oats. I understand that I can ask for forgiveness later, and that's what I'm planning on doing." It's like, "Well, you don't understand that sin hardens the heart."

Then there's something else here. He goes, "The day of salvation." Twice it says, "A favorable season" in verse 2. Now, I don't fully understand this, but it means something like there are certain seasons where God is at work in your life, doing something unique, and you don't want to miss out on that season.

You only get one season to raise your kids in the home. You get one season to date well toward marriage. You get one season to build a foundation of your marriage. You don't get many. One of my mentors... He's such a godly guy. We were talking one time about our devotional lives. He's humble. He didn't mean this in a prideful way, but he said... It was a group of us that were out.

He said, "Guys..." I couldn't believe this, but I do believe it because he's so godly. He said, "I never miss a devotion." He's that kind of guy. I'm like, "Never?" He said, "But sometimes I miss the Lord." Then he said this. This is the kind of guy he is. He said, "Every morning when I wake up, the Lord puts on my heart, 'Seek me first, and seek me while I might be found.'" He said, "Most days, I get up, I read my Bible, I pray, and I seek the Lord, but every once in a while..." He likes sports.

He said, "Every once in a while, I get on ESPN, and I start reading *this*, I start reading *that*, and I start reading the news." He said, "Then I get to it. It's 30 minutes to an hour later. I go and sit in my chair. I open my Bible." He said, "One time I did that, and I felt the Lord, through the Holy Spirit, speak to my heart. 'You won't be found by me today. You did not seek me first.'" We don't even have a category for that.

Here's the thing. You meet people who got caught. You meet people whose lives fall apart. If you're willing to sit with them for hours, they can walk you back. "It was right there. That was it. Seven years ago, I knew the Lord was telling me to do

something." I remember I talked to a guy who had an affair. I was like, "Dude, I need to know. I don't need the salacious details. I need to know what happened. How does something like that happen?"

He said, "It was the moment where I felt like I needed to tell my wife about this interest, that I was talking to her too much. The Lord was putting it on my heart to do that, and I didn't." He was looking back, like, three years. You don't want to be on either side of those conversations. They're sad conversations. Now is the time to do something.

## **02 WE NEED TO REMOVE EVERY OBSTACLE TO OTHER PEOPLE BELIEVING**

The second thing we have to do is remove every obstacle to other people coming to faith in Christ. Look here. Paul is so awesome. He's just explaining his ministry. ***"We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry..."*** You know this, but what is an obstacle? Let's just state the obvious. It's something put in someone's way (this is literally the definition) that hinders their future or further progress.

This is interesting. I don't know a lot about psychology, but from a psychological perspective, you see the world as tools and obstacles, because, really, you see the world as a place to act and move and live. Whether it's a chair or a stump or a beanbag or a bench, it's something to sit on.

So, we see the world as tools, but then we see the world as obstacles. Does anyone else love being in traffic? It's like, "Argh!" Right? You weren't mad at that person until they became an obstacle to you. Paul says we want to remove every obstacle. Why? Well, first, God removed every obstacle.

Sin was an obstacle. Jesus said, "I'll die in your place and pay the penalty for your sin." A lack of holiness and righteousness was an obstacle. Jesus said, "I'll live the life you can't live." Death was an obstacle. Death was going to take us away from God. Jesus said, "I'll go through death so that death is now the doorway to enter into relationship with me." Paul says we need to take down every obstacle.

Now listen. If you're interested in this and want to look at this with your Community Group, in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, Paul talks about this in great detail. He just gives us a verse here, but if you want to go deeper (it takes the whole Bible to make the whole Christian), you could do that.

In 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, Paul calls them *stumbling blocks*. If you know your Bible, you might be familiar with that language. Paul is like, "I don't want to put a stumbling block." What's a stumbling block? An obstacle you trip over. He says, "I don't want to put stumbling blocks in front of anybody."

I won't get into it, but Paul talks about these different stumbling blocks he can put in it. According to Scripture, and according to church history as well, what do you think is the greatest obstacle that hinders people from coming to Christ? What is the greatest obstacle that Christians put in front of others?

Some people might say, "Well, making rules about the rules." Yeah, that's not helpful. "Dumb traditions they won't let go of." That can be an obstacle too, but I'll tell you what it is according to Scripture: hypocritical Christians. I say that, because if you read verse 3... Read it with me. You can just look at it. Paul says, "We don't put any obstacle in front of anyone," and then he says, "I don't want you to find any fault in my ministry."

So, how do you remove obstacles? Well, you have to identify what they might be, obviously, so you have to take time and think and pray and know people and think about, "What would be their obstacle?" You're not going to like the answer to how Paul deals with obstacles.

I don't have time to get into this because it would be a whole other sermon, but in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says how he deals with all of the obstacles, and here's his answer: "I lay down my rights that I could hold on to to reach more people." Look. We live in a time where people are obsessed with their rights and not with their responsibilities. Right?

Let me just go on record. I love the Bill of Rights. I love our inalienable rights. I love the freedom to assemble, the freedom of the press, the freedom of speech, and the freedom of religion, but I'm talking about how everybody today thinks, "Well, I have the right to do whatever I want to do, say whatever I want to say, and do whatever I want to do with my body." That is so immature. That sounds like a 2-year-old.

That's not what a Christian says. A Christian says, "I have a lot of rights, but I'm willing to lay them down to reach people." Read 1 Corinthians 9. Do you know what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9? He says, "I'd like to get married." Go read it. He goes, "Peter is married. Don't I have the right to get married?" He says, "I'm laying that right down, because that would hinder me in reaching people."

Then he goes on in 1 Corinthians 9. He goes, "Don't I have the right to get paid for preaching?" He's like, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to work on tents, because I don't want you to say I'm in it for the money." Paul would constantly lay down his

rights to remove obstacles, which, by the way, leads to verse 4...a lot of suffering. Look at verse 4. It's like, "How much in this letter are we going to talk about suffering?" Well, we need to.

**"...but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance..."** Paul is going to talk about how he endures. **"...in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger..."** It's hard to read that stuff. I don't have time to get into it. We'll get there in a month or two. In chapter 11, Paul expands and lays out all of his sufferings.

Here's what I want you to notice: all of the words have an *S* at the end of them...*calamities, afflictions, beatings, sleepless nights*. Nothing happened one time to Paul. If you're going to work with God, if you're going to have a theology of the day, if you're going to remove obstacles, are you ready for your life to be more difficult than it currently is? The answer for many of us, if we're honest, is no, we are not ready for that. Paul says, "I'm willing to suffer."

Now listen. I think about a conversation I just had two weeks ago. There's a friend of mine... I just think about the suffering. We need to honor the Christians who have suffered. A friend of mine's parents are missionaries far overseas. He was sharing with a group of us. He said, "My mom and dad are missionaries. They've been missionaries for 40 years."

Then, involuntarily, he even started crying. He goes, "I don't know why I'm crying about this," and he just starts crying to us. He says, "They've never owned a home." I'm thinking, "Oh my." I mean, it's a first-world problem, I guess, but still. He says, "Yeah, they've never owned a home. They're retiring as missionaries, and I'm trying to help them get their first home. They don't have equity. They don't have..." It's like, "Oh, gosh."

He says, "Yeah, they don't feel like they're American. They haven't lived here for 40 years. They don't really feel like they're where they're from, because that's their second language and second culture." This is what Paul went through. Paul went through enormous external hardship, but then look. He goes from external hardship to internal hardship.

If you read carefully, the language was *in*, and now it's *by*. Watch what he says here. **"...by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left..."** Paul says, "I'm able to suffer, lay down my rights, remove obstacles, and..." Here's the key. "...not be bitter and resentful about it."

What is it about...? I don't want to say *all* of us. I'm tempted to say *most*, certainly *many* of us. When suffering comes into our lives, it tends to corrupt our character. It tends to make us the worst versions of ourselves. Part of that is, if we're honest, we're always looking for an excuse to be bad. When something happens to us that we feel is unfair and unjust, we're like, "I got it." Have you ever seen...? I'm not saying this happens every time.

Have you ever seen a couple go through a horrible divorce? Usually, one, if not both, of them becomes the worst version of themselves for a long season. Why? Because they finally have an excuse to be horrible. "The reason I'm looking at all this is she's so unavailable, she has put on so much weight, and she gives me such a hard time." It's like, "You were looking for an excuse to look at something you shouldn't be looking at, and now you have it."

How do you build your character, guys? Look. Paul says, "Kindness." He's using all of these fruits of the Holy Spirit. I was just talking to the A1:8 students (these are our students who are with us for the summer) about character, and I said, "Every business book worth its salt starts with character. 'You've got to have character.' But they never really tell you how to get it."

Every time we talk to someone about character, it's intimidating. Right? If I were like, "All right, guys. I'm going to come up here for an hour and talk about character," you'd be like, "Oh, no!" "Who are you when no one else is around?" You'd be like, "Ah! I don't want to..."

How do you change your character? Well, there are three words in there. He mentions character qualities, and he mentions three words: *knowledge*, the *Holy Spirit*, and the *power of God*. There's something deeper than our character, and it's our communion with Christ. Beholding the glory of God, we are transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

Then Paul says this. Verse 8: "***...through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise.***" Notice the contrast. "***We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.***"

If I could make the most obvious statement today... Paul was a polarizing person. Here's what Paul just did there: "Let me tell you..." Because he's like, "I'm self-aware." Even before we knew what that phrase was, Paul was self-aware. Paul says, "I'm self-aware. I'm emotionally intelligent. I know how people are experiencing me."

Could you imagine? No one is neutral about Paul. Could you imagine asking someone, "What do you think about the apostle Paul?" "Eh, I don't really have an opinion. He seems like a nice, well-meaning..." No. Paul is saying, "I've been getting one-star and five-star reviews my whole life."

I saw this comedian the other day. He was going off on "Who gives three-star reviews?" You know, to go on Yelp or to go on Google to say, "It was okay" is kind of goofy. Right? If you look it up, actually, most reviews are one star or five stars. That makes a ton of sense.

You have to be driving back in the car with your wife and go, "That was... I've got to get on Yelp and... This place is amazing." Or you have to have a horrible experience and be like, "We're getting on Yelp. We're giving it one star." All I'm trying to say is Paul is saying when you're a Christian, you get one-star reviews and five-star reviews.

Let me quote the late, great Tim Keller. He was such a kind guy. He basically said, "If everybody likes you, you're probably unfaithful to Christ, and if everybody hates you, you're probably a jerk." That's it. So, here's what Paul understood. When you live *for* Jesus, you live *like* Jesus, and when you live like Jesus, you're going to be treated like Jesus was.

Paul said, "I know what it's like to live at the extremes of life. I know what it's like for people to love when I show up and hate when I show up. I know what it's like to sign autographs and take selfies with people, and I know what it's like to be kicked out of town."

One place Paul goes, there's a riot and a revival. I don't think they're accidentally there both for the same reason. I think there's a purpose there. I think to the extent that we're loved we'll also be hated. To the extent that we're effective we'll also be persecuted.

### **03 WE NEED TO BE EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE AND PRESENT**

There's a third thing I want you to see here. Yes, we need a theology of today. Yes, we need to be able to remove obstacles. This is the hard one for men, especially. Here's the next one: we need to be emotionally vulnerable and present. All of the guys are like, "What does that mean?" Guys normally have four emotions: angry, hungry, bored, and asleep. I don't know. Something like that.

We're not really good with talking about our feelings. Look at what Paul does. Paul is a masculine man. Paul is suffering every day, and here's what he says: "***We have***

***spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.*** A famous commentary on the book of 2 Corinthians is entitled *A Heart Opened Wide*, because he believed this was the theme for the whole book.

***"You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children)..."*** Which means kindly. ***"...widen your hearts also."*** Paul talks about his emotions and his feelings. It's interesting. In all of Paul's letters, there are only three instances where Paul calls out the church by name, and it's always when he's really emotionally stirred.

In Galatians, he says at one point, "Galatians, oh, who has bewitched you?" He's all upset at the false teaching they're embracing. In Philippians, Paul gets really emotional, and he addresses them by name. He says, "Philippians, when we needed money for gospel partnerships, no church entered into partnership with us except for you." Then this is the third place where Paul says, "Guys, open your hearts to me."

Let me just sum it up. We read these things. Let me make it really simple. Here's what Paul is saying: "I'd like to have a better relationship with you guys than I do." I don't know if we can get any more real today than asking, "Who do you need to have a better relationship with than you currently do?" Your life is only as good or bad as the relationships that are in it.

I know as our kids get older it's like, "Man..." Your adult children... Some of you would say, "I'd like to have a better relationship." Some marriages... I'm not saying it's easy. I'm saying there are some marriages where it could be powerful if on the way home or tonight or at some point, if it was really honest... "You know what? Our relationship is not where it should be, and I would like to have a better relationship with you."

Paul tells us how to do that. It's simple, not easy. He says, "I do two things if I need to have a better relationship with people. I speak freely, and I open my heart." You know, I keep talking about marriage because it's the crucible of all relationships. A marriage falls apart when you can't talk about anything anymore.

Here's what it means to speak freely: "Would you give me permission to say this badly? I'm going to try to talk about our marriage, and you're going to disagree. Can I talk about it badly for 10 minutes without cancel culture? Can we edit? Can I then have a second chance to say it again if I mess up?" For some of you, there are certain topics you won't talk about. That's exactly what you need to talk about.

So, you speak freely, and then the other thing is you open your heart to people. See, here's what everybody is waiting for with that prodigal son you don't get along with or the marriage that has been a 2 out of 10 for the last five years. Everyone is waiting

for the other person to open their heart. "I'll be ready as soon as she opens her heart."

Paul said, "My heart is open." Could you get to that place in a relationship? "Nothing is holding this relationship back on my end." See, here's what happens in relationships. They say you go through three stages. When you're young, you're naïve about relationships. I'm saying when you're a little kid. You think, "Everybody is good, and everybody is nice."

That's why you have to tell kids, "Stay away from strangers. Don't take candy out of that van." They're like, "Everybody is friendly." It's like, "No, not everybody is friendly." Then you get into middle school and high school and college, and you realize, "Man, people can really hurt me." So, people move from naïve to cynical, but there's another step afterward: courageous. Cynical is better than naïve, but not as good as saying, "I'm going to create..."

Okay. Here's the application. You need to take risks, and you need to be willing to be hurt. My youth pastor, God bless him... I didn't realize how much wisdom there was when I was this young. My youth pastor used to say to us... He was in his early 30s. He'd been a youth pastor for, like, 15 years. He just loved high school students. He was all in with us all the time.

He used to say to us all the time, "Guys, when I get to heaven, I just want to give Jesus my heart, and I want it to be all beat up. I'll be like, 'Jesus, I loved people. I tried a lot of things that didn't work, and a lot of people hurt me, but I lived full-out for you. Would you heal my broken heart?'" How many people don't live like that today? Paul says, "I want to have a better relationship than we do."

#### **04 WE NEED TO BE DIFFERENT SO WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Finally, Paul says, if we're going to work with God, we need to be different and distinct. Look here. Second Corinthians 6:14: "***Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.***" You know about this verse. We talk about this verse this week on the podcast if you want to go dive deeper into it.

There are two places where I think Christians often get unequally yoked. The first is obviously marriage. That happens by dating non-Christians. You read the Old Testament. This is such a big deal. It's like rule one. Christians have to marry Christians. Missionary dating leads to miserable marriages. That's what it does.

There's a lot of grace, because here's what's interesting. Remember how God says, "Don't be unequally yoked"? Sometimes God creates unequally yoked marriages. How



does he do that? He converts one of the spouses. When I was interviewing Lee Strobel, Lee Strobel said, "Kyle, the more effective at evangelism your church is, the more unequally yoked marriages you will have." I was like, "I never thought about that."

He said, "Oh, yeah, because your church members will be leading people to Christ at their workplace, and some woman or some man will say, 'Oh my goodness! I'm a Christian. I was a non-Christian. My husband was a non-Christian. Now I'm a Christian and he's still a non-Christian.'" Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7, if that's where you are, then stay where you are.

I was just talking to a couple that's thinking about marriage recently, and I said, "Guys..." I don't know everything, obviously, but I was like, "Guys, so much of marriage is being able to have a higher authority outside of yourselves that you agree on that you can appeal to, and if you have two different lords, you can't do that."

Then, quickly, Christian friendship. This is controversial and maybe offensive, but most things that are helpful are controversial and also maybe offensive. I think a Christian's closest friends have to be other Christians. I'm not saying you can't have a non-Christian who's a really close friend of yours. We talk about having a "one," someone far from God and close to you. That can be a friend.

I'm simply saying, "Show me your friends, and I will show you your future." I'm simply saying that God created you to be susceptible to peer pressure, so you'd better put yourself in the right environment, under the right peer pressure. Show me your friends, and I'll show you your future. You are the average of your five closest friendships.

By the way, this is why we have kids' ministry. If you think kids' ministry is childcare... There are so many things going on in kids' ministry. Part of it is we're trying to connect your kids to other kids in our church so they might be raised with Christian friends the rest of their lives. That's in large part what student ministry is about.

Whenever a parent comes to me and says, "Well, my son or my daughter doesn't like hanging out with Christians," I always... You know, I have that part of my brain that's like, "How honest do I want to be right now? What should I say?" There are inside words and there are outside words. Right? The honest answer in most situations... Now, it could be they have religious people around them who aren't really Christians, and they're judged by... That's okay.

But whenever someone says, "My son or my daughter doesn't want to hang out with Christians," I'm like, "Your daughter, then, is not a Christian." I mean, one of the

miraculous signs of conversion is a love for the church. When I became a Christian, it was so clear. "The first thing I need is some new relationships."

Here's what he says here. The problem is we've forgotten the difference between a Christian and non-Christian, because, unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be much difference. The American Christian and the American non-Christian give about the same amount to charity. The American Christian and the American non-Christian's dating and divorce rates and all that... It's all the same.

But that's not what Paul says. Look here. ***"For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?"*** And you're thinking about dating a non-Christian? ***"Or what fellowship has light with darkness?"*** "No, he's nice. He believes in God." ***"What accord has Christ with Belial?"*** That's a name for the Devil.

***"Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.'"***

Basically, here's what this is about. We are to be separated from sin and dedicated to the Lord. The story of the Old Testament could be summed up in God telling his people to stay separated so they could be a light and blessing to the nations and them not listening and constantly getting disciplined.

The principle is...*How do you be in the world but not of it?* It's very difficult. Christians have been wrestling with this for 2,000 years. We're wrestling with it again as our nation is changing. I mean, we're wrestling with it. What do you do? Do you homeschool? Do you public school? Do you Christian school? Do you charter school? Do you do university model school?

These are all deeply theological questions of how we engage with the world. I don't have time. Maybe we'll do a podcast sometime about all of the different things of this, but here's the thing. He says you have to be separated from sin and dedicated to the Lord. You have to repent and replace.

Have you ever talked to an alcoholic about quitting alcohol? There *is* no quitting alcohol. There's replacing it. Repent and replace. This is why John Daly, the golfer, has had, like, 15 cross addictions. Do you remember? He gave up smoking cigarettes for a round, and he drank Diet Cokes. This is well documented. You have to repent, and you have to replace. What we're trying to do is be a counterculture here, guys.

We had the Weekender this weekend, and I was walking around. We had all of these tables here. I walked around this one table. They said, "Pastor Kyle, get over here." I said, "Yeah, what's up?" They were excited. I came over. They said, "We all have a question for you." They were like, "Yeah, even our table host doesn't know the answer to *this* one." I was like, "Okay. What is it?" They were like, "Why are we called *Two Cities Church*?" I was like, "I have failed in life."

First, it's a nod to Winston-Salem. Winston-Salem was two cities that came together in 1913, so I wanted to name a church something that would honor the city and nod to its history. But the main reason, the second reason, is that Christian theologians, for hundreds and hundreds of years, have talked about the city of God and the city of man.

We wanted to be a city within a city. That was always our vision as a church, which is to be a counterculture, to say, "Hey, listen. We do marriage and family and sex and money and parenting... How about we do everything differently?" Here's what we're trying to be. We're going to be an attractive alternative.

So, here it is. It's June, and the world has its own idea of what June should be about. Here's what I think June should be about. What a great month to repent. There's no better time to repent than right now. So, what if you said, "You know what? I'm done not working with God. I'm going to work with God, not work against God"? What if you said, "You know what? I'm going to be emotionally present. I'm going to open up my Bible and open up my life"?

Guys, as I told you at the beginning, as we think about what God has in the future of our church, when we think about going to Lexington... What are we doing to go to Lexington? We're trying to remove every obstacle for people to hear the gospel. What are we doing when we're going to Lexington? We're trying to be a different and distinct community there. So, if you'll bow your heads and close your eyes, I just want to ask God to bless our desire to work with him in his global purposes.

Lord, there's a lot there. Would you help us to work with you and not against you? Lord, would you help us...? Some couples might need to grab each other's hand right now and say, "You know what? Gospel partnership, not just married couple." Some roommates need to go home and say, "We're not just roommates; we're gospel partners." Lord, would you build a church of gospel partners who remove obstacles, who are emotionally present, and who are an attractive alternative in a lost and dying world? We pray this in Christ's name, amen.