



CHARACTER MATTERS

**Shepherding in the
Fruit of the Spirit**

AARON MENIKOFF

Am I a Noisy Gong?

LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS,
FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, SELF-CONTROL

Ministry would be fine if it weren't for all the people.” That line usually gets a chuckle. As pastors, we know people are the focus of ministry, but they're also the cause of great frustration. People mess up our plans. Good plans. Plans to build a student ministry, organize an evangelistic event, reach an unreached people group, or simply pastor a church. Like an engineer sketching the steps of a project, we set goals, establish timelines, and rally volunteers to accomplish our mission. It's easy to see people as obstacles to our mission. We forget people *are* the mission.

Christian leaders are tempted to treat people like cogs in a machine—pieces we maintain to ensure the engine runs smoothly. The “machine” can be a friendship, a family, a marriage, a ministry, or even a church. If this is our mindset, friends, children, spouses, volunteers, and church members become parts we use to meet our own personal desires. We grow bitter when the parts

don't work properly, wrecking our plan. Instead of loving the people God sovereignly and wisely placed in our lives, we use them, and prove we love ourselves most of all.

A LOT TO LEARN ABOUT LOVE

When I first began to preach, I didn't think deeply about the congregation. Instead, I focused on my craft. *How is my introduction? Am I making good eye contact? Are my points rooted in the text? Is the gospel clear? Did I wrap up with a compelling conclusion?* Such questions are important. But I should have asked other questions about preaching, ones not typically raised in courses on theology or homiletics. *Do I care about my audience? Do I know them? Am I aware of their trials? Do I love them? Do I love the God who made them?* These questions are just as important, and too often overlooked.

Shortly after one of my first Sunday evening sermons, I met up with a godly friend to get some feedback. We sat at his kitchen table over a cup of coffee and a box of Entenmann's pastries. Before he could say a word, I defensively assured him my message didn't measure up to my standards.

He listened as I lamented my performance. Of course, I secretly hoped he would interrupt and counter my assessment. I gave him every opportunity to correct me. "Aaron," he could have said, "your message was actually quite good; be encouraged." I longed for him to explain how my insightful words changed his life. Instead, he thanked me for preaching and changed the topic.

A few days later, he placed a handwritten note in my mailbox. It began with 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Paul's point is clear: when pursuing spiritual gifts to make us look good, we rob them of their value. My friend

recognized that I focused on myself more than the people I had hoped to serve.

The verse he wrote out for me struck its blow. Somehow, in all my preparation, I'd failed to love the people God called me to teach. Yes, I needed to wisely handle the text. Of course, I needed to carefully expound and apply the gospel. Absolutely, I needed to seek feedback to grow as a preacher. But what does it matter if I lack love? I'd treated God's people like cogs in the machine of my ministry. I'd become a noisy gong.

I had a lot to learn about love. Sanctification without love is meaningless. To see why, we need to think about an earlier event in the Christian life: justification.

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LOVE COMES FIRST IN JUSTIFICATION

Though love is key to sanctification, it's at the heart of justification too. Paul had a quarrel with the churches in Galatia. The gospel of God's grace had become less clear to them, less dear. They turned the volume down on Paul's message of salvation by grace alone and cranked up the sound on the law. False teachers had sneaked a Trojan horse full of good works into the city of their salvation. Sadly, the young Galatian churches opened wide their gates.

Paul did all he could to close them. He begins his letter to them with a roar: "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9). Paul allowed no confusion. Salvation is either all of grace, or it's fiction. The works of the law have the power to condemn, but they cannot

make us right in the eyes of a holy God. “By works of the law,” declared Paul, “no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

Christians contribute nothing to their justification. Death, not works, marks the start of the Christian life. Sound crazy? Look at Paul. He knew he couldn’t lead himself into a holy, happy Christian life. Before he could live with Christ, Paul had to die with Him. This explains Paul’s joyful exclamation: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

Notice what Paul says Jesus did. Jesus “loved” him and “gave himself up” for him. Love came first. Love always comes first.

Most Christians eventually ask why God saved them and not their unbelieving mother, brother, friend, or neighbor. They toy with bad answers. *God knew I would choose him. God thought I might be helpful for his work on earth. God thinks I’m special.* But if any of these answers were true, our salvation would depend on us. That can’t be. The only answer to the question of why God saved you is because He loved you. Salvation belongs to God. It depends on God. It always has.

When God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt and gave them a land to possess, He knew they’d one day wonder why. Moses answered this question by pointing them to the love of God.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:7–8)

God's salvation of His people has always been rooted in love for His people. God committed to them. He set His affection on them. He secured the best for them. This is love. Love comes first in justification, and this sets the stage for our sanctification.

LOVE COMES FIRST IN SANCTIFICATION

It should be no surprise to find Paul puts love first when he lists the pieces of the fruit of the Spirit. This is because love kick-starts everything in the Christian life.

Christ gave Himself up for us because He loved us. This is the heart of justification. If Christ gave Himself up for us, we will love others. This is the heart of sanctification. A loveless life is a Christless life. The apostle John made it quite clear our sanctification flows out of our justification. Put another way, our love for others flows from God's love for us:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:10–12).

John inserted a statement in these verses which, at first glance, doesn't quite seem to fit. He wrote "no one has ever seen God." Why make this point here? Because the fact that we can't see God makes it tough to know we have a relationship with God. It's much easier to prove you have a relationship with someone you can see.

My wife and I obviously have a relationship. I can see her, and she can see me. We spend a lot of time with one another. We go to the same church. We drive together in the same car. We live in

the same house. When I first got married, I was surprised by just how much I saw her. The fact that I constantly see her is a small but important piece of evidence that I love her.

God can see us, but we can't see Him. So how is our relationship to God made visible? In our love for one another: "If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). A few verses later, John is even clearer: "he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (4:20).

As I look back at just this past week, I see so many examples of believers loving one another in my church. One man just asked for a ride to and from the hospital, and someone quickly offered to help. A young couple just had their second child, and brothers and sisters brought meals to make the transition easier. A handful of elders are currently hard at work to help a couple work through some serious marriage issues. All this is done out of love.

This is basic Christianity. Love is the first and best evidence we are Christians. Not splashy websites. Not expanding churches. Not growing budgets. Not a vast social media presence. Not even good sermons. Love is the primary piece of the fruit of the Spirit because it's the best evidence God redeemed us from sin.

KNOWING ABOUT LOVE VERSUS LOVING

Anyone who reads the Bible is going to know something about love. We find it on nearly every page of Scripture. Love is the bedrock of biblical theology. For example, we know God is love (1 John 4:8). What else could explain His relentless pursuit of an unholy people? The God who told His people to love (Deut. 6:5) is the one who first loved them (1 John 4:19). God's election of His church is not rooted in Him looking down the corridor of

time and seeing something lovely in us. No, God chose to save a wicked people due to the vast storehouse of His divine and inexplicable love (Deut. 7:7–8; Eph. 2:4). The youngest Christian knows loving God and neighbor is part of the warp and woof of the Christian life (Mark 12:31). The command to love is a command too obvious to miss.

J. I. Packer famously described the difference between knowing about God and knowing God. He likened it to a person sitting on a balcony and watching people set off on a journey down the road below. It's one thing to see the path from above. It's another thing altogether to get your feet dirty on the earthy terrain. So it is with knowing God. We can't do it from afar. We dare not make it an academic exercise; there's no such thing as an ivory tower Christian.¹

Likewise, there is a world of difference between knowing about love and actually loving. I have a close friend who went on an overseas missions trip when he was a young Christian. He spent his day evangelizing but saw no spiritual fruit—at least not from his own efforts. God used his partners in ministry to lead a few to saving faith. My friend knew he should be happy. Instead, he begrudged their success. He cared more about his reputation than others' salvation. This is not love.

It's difficult to begrudge the success of a ministry neighbor when you love them. Every Christian, and certainly every Christian leader, must place love at the heart of his or her ministry. A

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pastor who knows about love, but doesn't actually love, makes a mockery of his calling as a shepherd of God's flock.

THE ENEMIES OF LOVE

The day I opened my friend's note referencing 1 Corinthians 13, I was like that man sitting in the balcony. I knew about love. I could speak to its importance. I could describe its contours. But I elbowed love aside to make room for two of its most vicious enemies: pride and self-interest.

Pride asks how we look, instead of how others feel. It's fed when the preacher lusts to be heard by a larger crowd or when a friend demands to be loved by a more popular person. Pride demands attention instead of giving encouragement. It swells when a leader covets the last word, or when a father intimidates his family into silence. Pride cares more about the leader's significance than the congregation's sanctification. Pride cares more about the growth of your church than the church belonging to your friend downtown.

Self-interest is pride's cousin. It bends over backwards to make life more comfortable. Self-interest is like a man who doesn't get out of bed in the morning. He sleeps under the covers where it's cozy; he won't put his naked feet on the hard and cold bedroom floor. The day ahead is filled with a thousand opportunities to love and serve others, but self-interest says, "Just keep warm." Self-interest tells us service is too inconvenient, and perhaps even painful. It flourishes when we won't do or say the hard thing. I'm a task-focused worker. I enjoy crossing items off of my to-do list. Left to my own devices, I'll put my head down so I can get as many projects done as possible. Love kicks me off the computer, sits me down in the car, buckles the seatbelt, and sends me off to a homebound member.

How do leaders become nothing? How do pastors fail to love? By ministering from a reservoir of pride and self-interest. The longer I'm a pastor, the more I realize that pride and self-interest won't go down without a struggle. Like a prizefighter, they just keep punching. Those who won't fight back with fierce jabs of love are, quite simply, nothing (1 Cor. 13:2).

A WORD OF WARNING

It's important to explore how we can love better. But first, let's beware of falling into another ditch. More than one well-meaning leader has sacrificed truth at the altar of love. This would be a tragic mistake.

Love must never be pitted against the truth. The two are sweet friends. A "loving" pastor who abandons sound doctrine doesn't really love at all. He's like a doctor who greets his dying patient with a compassionate smile but withholds the very medicine that could save his life. Truth, and specifically the truth of the gospel, is our only hope of eternal life.

The Bible never makes love an enemy of the truth. They're comrades in arms. To feed Christ's sheep is to explain Christian doctrine to Christ's church. This kind of teaching is birthed out of love for Christ—love and truth must not be separated. Shepherds teach the truth of God's Word from hearts captured by God's love (Luke 6:45).

Where do you lean? Before reading on, you would be wise to

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assess your inclinations. Are you tempted to soft-pedal doctrine for the sake of another person's feelings? Or are you more likely to clarify scriptural truth while neglecting the souls of Christ's flock? Neither inclination is good. A heart genuinely moved by God will pursue truth and love.

AN EXEMPLARY MODEL

The last thing our churches or ministries need is leaders positioning themselves toward greater degrees of prominence. Pastors, for example, are called to love a local church. The people I serve need elders who dearly love them. The buzz of seeing how many "likes" you have on social media should pale in comparison to the joy of seeing the people you serve day-in-and-day-out growing in grace and godliness. We find an extraordinary example in the apostle Paul. If 1 Corinthians 13:1 ("noisy gong") convicts me of sin, 1 Thessalonians 2:8 calls me to action.

Paul and Silas faithfully planted the gospel in Thessalonica. Many Jews and Gentiles came to faith (Acts 17:1–4), even as these new Christians struggled. A mob of unbelievers attacked the fledgling church (Acts 17:5–9). Paul fled, the church grew in his absence, and when he wrote back he thanked God for their faith, love, and hope (1 Thess. 1:3). Paul rejoiced because the congregation at Thessalonica became a hub for gospel ministry (1 Thess. 1:8).

In many ways, this local church had everything I hope to see in the church I serve today: holiness, joy, steadfastness, and evangelistic fervor. Clearly, Paul was thankful for the fruit of their ministry. But Paul appeared to be even more thankful for *them*. At the heart of Paul's greeting is a simple reminder of how much he loved this congregation.

We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.
(1 Thess. 2:7–8)

If Paul could describe himself as a nursing mother, shouldn't we strive to be as nurturing as we are prophetic, as loving as we are sound, as tender as we are true?

We tend to think of Paul as a strong and forceful defender of truth. Why then did he use the metaphor of a nursing mother? Because he wanted the church to grasp his love for them. He used words to implant an image that proved he didn't merely want to teach truth to them, he longed to share life with them.

Paul didn't see the Thessalonians as cogs in the machine of his own self-worth. He didn't value them for their potential to plant churches, reach the nations, enlarge his influence, or affirm his teaching gifts. Paul loved them deeply. He cared enough about the church to share not only the gospel with them, but his very self as well.

Elders rightly follow the example of the apostles in Acts 6:4 and devote themselves "to prayer and to the ministry of the word." As a result of this priority, pastoral ministry can be isolating. The good leader spends time on his knees, interceding for Christ's flock. The good leader prizes hours in study as he prepares to feed the church sound doctrine. These moments of quiet prayer and preparation can certainly be born out of a genuine love for God's people.

Unfortunately, it's also possible for pastors to use times of solitude to avoid God's people. Perhaps, without even being fully aware of what we're doing, we minimize opportunities to share ourselves with the very people God called us to love.

Years ago, a friend arranged for me to take a tour of a mega-church in our city. Presumably to facilitate time for prayer and study, the pastor built an office very close to the sanctuary. It included a “secret” entrance allowing him to enter and exit the stage virtually unseen. I marveled at the fact he could preach to his congregation without having to talk to them.

Are you striving to know and be known by the people you serve? Is your love for the body of Christ demonstrated in an eagerness to enjoy time with them? Sharing your life with the people you serve is a practical demonstration of love.

HOW TO GROW IN LOVE

I don’t want to be a noisy gong. No faithful leader does. So how can we grow in love?

Pray the gospel grips you. Unless you are overtaken by God’s amazing love for sinners, you won’t love others. Willpower doesn’t drive you to love; it can’t. God’s Spirit must work before you marvel at God who “shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The love you show others will never be as costly as the love He showed you. Pray that the simple gospel would take a firm hold of your life.

Examine your heart for signs of pride and self-interest. This is about as fun as having a tooth pulled, but it’s so important. Are you crestfallen when you aren’t recognized? Are you bitter if a church vote doesn’t go your way? Are you too scared to point out sin in the lives of others? Your answer to such questions will show whether you are bottling up love or, worse, will prove you lack it. When you truly love others, you don’t need them to agree with you or to affirm you. Your love for them will not be conditioned upon the acceptance they throw your way.

Share your life with others. Examples abound: an intentional conversation after a service; a coffee meeting where you talk about your spiritual health; opening up your home for a meal; an encouraging note to a struggling member; participating in a small group you don't lead. There are so many ways we can follow Paul's example and share "not only the gospel of God, but our own selves."

Persevere through conflict. Someone once told me it's easier to take the ship to Tarshish than the road to Nineveh. He's right. Love compels us to embrace the harder course. This means not running away from friends, not withdrawing from your spouse, and not escaping to an easier job or church. If people are just cogs to us, we'll move on when they start to rust. But if we love them, we'll care for them long after the gears crank and the machine slows down.

"HE GAVE UP HIS OWN EASE"

"Leaders lead. Followers follow." It's a common sentiment, and there's certainly some truth to it. For elders and Christian leaders to succeed, they have to chart the course. Furthermore, chaos will ensue if everyone charts their own course. That's why followers follow. Fair enough.

I once heard a pastor give an update on a church he had been leading a few years. For a number of reasons, the ministry had been difficult for him. Like many young pastors, he had a strong sense of where the church needed to be. He knew his Bible inside and out, and he held all the right values: expositional preaching, sound theology, careful church membership—the whole nine yards. Many pastors like him go into ministry with a clear-cut vision for what their church should look like, and they

are often right. They embrace the mantra, “leaders lead.”

As my friend shared his report, tears welled up in his eyes and he said, “I came to change the church, but the church has changed me.” He didn’t lose his theological spine. He kept his blueprint for the church’s future. But in the process of pastoring those saints, as trials erupted in his own life, he realized he needed them as much as they needed him. In those tears, I could see his love for the congregation God called him to serve.

He learned a valuable lesson: leaders don’t just lead, they love. And in loving, we come to look more like Jesus. Pastor Jonathan Edwards put it well:

Such was the love of Christ to us, that he did, as it were, spend himself for our sakes. His love did not rest in mere feeling, nor in light efforts and small sacrifices, but though we were enemies, yet he so loved us, that he had a heart to deny himself, and undertake the greatest efforts, and undergo the greatest sufferings, for our sakes. He gave up his own ease, and comfort, and interest, and honour, and wealth; and became poor, and outcast, and despised, and had not where to lay his head, and all for us!²

“Ministry would be fine if it weren’t for all the people.” That’s not true at all. Shepherding in the fruit of the Spirit starts with loving God *and* the sheep He has generously placed in your care.

Stop Looking for It!

LOVE, **JOY**, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS,
FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, SELF-CONTROL

I know I'm supposed to delight in God. For years I've heard the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.¹ Surely Paul wasn't kidding when he commanded, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). He meant it. Joy isn't the leather interior of the Christian life; it's not optional. Joy is a must, and the stakes are high. A heart that won't rejoice in Christ doesn't know Him. The Bible is clear: I need to rejoice. I get it. More than that, I want to rejoice. I really do.

But why is it so hard? I'm often sorrowful, and sometimes for no apparent reason. At times the words of God can bounce off my heart like rain on a tin roof. I know I'm not alone. I once preached a sermon on Psalm 28. I called it "Wisdom for the Depressed." King David staggered through seasons of terrible depression when God seemed far away. After that sermon, several listeners opened up to me about their bouts with depression. They wanted more joy, but struggled to find it. I understand.

The battle for joy is uniquely exhausting. It's not like the fight for other virtues. Let me explain why.

When I don't feel love towards my wife, I know there are loving deeds to be done. I can send her an encouraging text, bring home flowers, or help out more around home. There is no hypocrisy in this. Love is more than mere action, but it isn't less. I know I love my wife, and so I do loving things and wait for my feelings to catch up.

Likewise, there are moments when I don't feel at peace with a friend or a church member. Though I may feel peaceless, I can still control my tongue and use words to bless instead of curse. I can even overlook an offense (Prov. 19:11) or pursue a hard conversation in the hope of reconciliation. In other words, even when I don't feel at peace, I know there are peace-pursuing actions I can take. The fight for love and peace can be waged with particular actions.

But the fight for joy is different. It's not always obvious what doing joyful things looks like. Moreover, joyful actions don't stimulate joyful feelings. Harvard psychologist Amy Cuddy made a name for herself by teaching us to "fake it till we make it." She argues that if you spend a few minutes in a confident posture, with your arms behind your head and your legs stretched out on your desk, you'll be able to negotiate a higher salary.² Maybe.

But you can't muster joy. You can't fake it. Joy defies manipulation.

THE JOY OF MINISTRY

Most pastors take it personally when their churches struggle. Like termites chewing a home to dust, problems attack the joy of ministry. Intellectually, every Christian leader knows this shouldn't be the case. Paul found a way to delight in his trials. "If I must

boast,” says the apostle, “I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Cor. 11:30). If Paul could do it, so can we. But it’s far easier to identify our weaknesses than to boast in them.

A pastor’s weaknesses are on display seven days a week. He works too much (taking time from the family). He works too little (cutting corners on a sermon). He visits too much (neglecting the ministry of prayer and the Word). He visits too little (failing to “smell like the sheep”). He preaches too long (“Doesn’t he know I can’t sit forever?”). He preaches too short (“Is he afraid of what people think?”). Before you know it, the criticisms mount up and the pastor finds his joy chewed to shreds.

A young pastor emailed me distraught. He faced more opposition than he expected in his New England church. Like Jacob, he labored for seven long years. He had been pouring himself out for the good of that body and the glory of Christ’s name. Things didn’t progress the way he had hoped. I didn’t have to read between the lines to discern his pain. “I am beyond burned out,” he said, “discouraged and tired of fighting.”

Pastoring hundreds of miles away, I couldn’t adequately address this brother’s challenges. But I did my best to respond. “How is your soul?” I probed. “Are you still spending time with the Lord, praying, pushing hard into His grace? Are you overwhelmed with God’s kindness in saving you or does your salvation, for whatever reason, seem old hat?”

“My soul has not been well,” he replied. “I can honestly say I have been preparing other people’s food and starving myself. My prayer life has been weak, and my heart is very cold to the things of the Lord.” I wonder how many shepherds would answer the question the way he did. How would you respond?

If you are depressed, you are not alone. There is hope for you, but the answer may sting before it soothes. It’s easier than you

think to find your joy in the status of your ministry. This is a mistake because those who make an idol out of their church or work will find themselves hurt when the results seem unimpressive. The joy of ministry can't be found from the ministry—true joy is a gift, a fruit, of the Holy Spirit.

Joy. We must have it. And not because it makes Christianity attractive—though it does. And not because good leaders are joyful leaders—though they are. No, we need joy because its presence powerfully demonstrates that God means more to us than anything else. Joy is a precious piece of the fruit of the Spirit.

So what is joy?

NOT THE ABSENCE OF SORROW

Joy is not the absence of sorrow. It's important to start here because too many believers walk in a fog of guilt. They think their sadness is sin. But that's not necessarily true, and to assert that joy is the absence of sadness trivializes our pain and, more importantly, misreads the Bible. Joy and sadness often mix.

The writers of the Psalms never hid their sadness:

*"To you, O LORD, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me."
(Ps. 28:1)*

"I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away." (Ps. 31:9–10)

"My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" (Ps. 42:3)

These writers didn't try to fake it till they made it. Ask a leader how he's doing, and you'll usually hear, "I'm doing fine." Rarely will you be met with psalm-like transparency. Being transparent about the reality of your trials is vital. We all face seasons of grief.

However, it's important to note that the psalmists had deep confidence in God's faithfulness, even as it accompanied their tears in grief. In Psalm 28, David may be burdened by the fact that God seems deaf to him, yet he still calls God his rock (28:1). When his circumstances nearly crush him, David calls others to trust his faithful God: "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord" (31:24). Though the author of Psalm 42 is deeply dejected and depressed, his faith in God is deeper still: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (42:11). In the songs of God's people, we find sadness and joy are never far apart.

For more proof, look no further than Jesus, who wept at the tomb of His dear friend Lazarus (John 11:35). Jesus didn't feign gladness. He didn't start singing "It Is Well with My Soul." Jesus wept. And He didn't weep because it was the natural or socially appropriate response. He wept because it was the godly response. The one who always rejoiced in His Father poured out tears for a friend. Joy is not the absence of sadness.

NOT THE PRESENCE OF A SMILE

Neither is joy the presence of a smile, a tired display of shallow optimism. It's easy to look at someone with a big grin and assume he's full of joy. But a smile doesn't necessarily reflect joy.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt pulled America through the Great Depression by sheer force of will. His charismatic personality filled a room, and his lips dripped with cheerfulness. But

apparently he didn't feel it deep down. Historians tell us his sunny disposition was smoke and mirrors. Unhappiness punctuated his daily existence. Why the façade? Roosevelt believed the nation needed an Optimist in Chief. Even though his inner life reeked with despair, he put on the mask of optimism. We see in Roosevelt's life that optimism and joy are two different qualities entirely. Optimism can be faked, joy can't.

Of course, Christians have a profound reason to be optimistic. We know that in the end God wins. Yet I confess there are days I'm tempted, like FDR, to pretend I'm happy. I paste a smile on my face when discouragement saturates my heart. That smile may look like joy, but it isn't—at least not always. The church would be stronger if more pastors would be as honest about their suffering as they are about God's sovereignty. I want to grow in this area.

Whether you're a pastor or not, it's hard to admit when you aren't doing well. Many people expect you to be upbeat about the ministry, the future, and your own soul. It's tempting to put on a positive front while you fail to open your heart.

Optimism can be skin-deep, but joy is rooted in the heart. When you gather with God's people, don't assume everyone is happy. Yes, the tomb is empty and Christians have come together to rejoice. This will undoubtedly produce many encouraged hearts and beaming faces. But behind those grins may be hearts torn up by the sins and sorrows of the world. The presence of a smile is no guarantee of true joy.

HONEST, BUT NOT TOO HONEST?

Honesty and transparency are important for a ministry to be marked by integrity. If we don't let people know how we are really

doing, we aren't being sincere. Good leaders know how to share their hearts without leading others to despair.

I've not always done this well. A number of years ago, when our church faced a serious transition, I felt discouraged. The number of people leaving began to wear on me. On my worst days, I didn't know how much longer I could last. Around this time, a faithful young couple came to our home to talk. They came because they loved what they saw at the church and wanted to be a part of the change. They knew it wasn't all roses, but they didn't see many of the thorns. As we talked about the future of the church, my heart slipped out of my mouth and I said with more than a hint of sarcasm, "Of course, all this assumes the church will make it." The wife's face flushed with astonishment. "Were things really that bad?" she wondered.

I didn't know how to be realistic about my struggles without discouraging others. Charles Spurgeon did. Zack Eskwine described Spurgeon's ability to open up about his own depression while keeping the eyes of his church fixed on Christ. One Sunday morning, Spurgeon candidly told his congregation, "I almost regret this morning that I have ventured to occupy this pulpit, because I feel utterly unable to preach to you for your profit." Spurgeon remained devastated by a tragedy a few weeks prior at his church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Someone had screamed, "Fire!" and the ensuing chaos led to several deaths and even more injuries. In his sadness, he told his congregation he could barely preach.

But Spurgeon's confidence in the Lord was greater than his despair, and so he prayed at the start of his message, "Oh, Spirit of God, magnify thy strength in thy servant's weakness, and enable him to honour his Lord, even when his soul is cast down within him."³ Though greatly depressed, Spurgeon remained hopeful

that God would do a good work. As we'll see shortly, Spurgeon knew how to keep his eyes on the Lord.

Even on your worst days, it's crucial for ministry leaders to serve with a sense of confidence. After all, we know when all is said and done, Christ is on His throne, He is victorious, and the gates of hell will never prevail against the church (Matt. 16:18). That's tremendous news. At the deepest level, every Christian can be wholeheartedly optimistic because salvation history is not in jeopardy and will never be in jeopardy—not today, not tomorrow, not next week. Our ministry may be in the pits, but God's plan is unfolding just fine.

Joy is not the absence of sorrow. Many good leaders experience real joy even as they struggle with depression. Neither is joy the presence of a smile. Just because a pastor is optimistic doesn't necessarily mean he is joyful—optimism can be faked.

What, then, is joy?

WHAT JOY IS

Joy is delightful confidence in the triune God who orchestrated, accomplished, and applied our salvation.⁴ God's people respond to His character and His actions joyfully. Joy is an inward affection that finds an outward expression in praise and adoration and song. A God who dwells with His people inspires the psalmist to "sing for joy" (Ps. 84:2). A God who has done great things is a God in whom we can "be glad and rejoice" (Joel 2:21). And when the Ethiopian eunuch found salvation in the gospel proclaimed by Philip, he "went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39).

Randy Alcorn, citing the missionary Amy Carmichael, describes joy as "settled happiness." It's a gift from God that "is ours today because Christ is here; it's ours tomorrow because Christ

will be there; and it's ours forever because he will never leave us.”⁵ I agree with Carmichael and Alcorn that joy is “settled happiness,” and it's settled because it's rooted in a life-changing faith that knows God is wonderful. Optimism fades when the forecast is bleak, but nothing can shake the ground of our joy, because the ground of our joy is a holy, loving, faithful, and immovable God.

One of the best places to see this is in 2 Chronicles 20. King Jehoshaphat stood on the brink of an epic battle. A league of nations with an overwhelming military advantage prepared to invade Judah (20:1–3). In the midst of these dire circumstances, Jehoshaphat gathered the whole nation and did the only thing that made sense; he cried out to the Lord. Jehoshaphat prayed honestly in his moment of weakness: “We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do” (20:12).

It's a prayer we all can relate to. When the future of the church seems to be in question. When the health of a child is uncertain.

When your confidence in your ability to lead is at an all-time low. What else can you do in moments like this but confess, “God, I don't know what to do.”

Like Jehoshaphat, the depressed feel fragile. Jesus never failed to trust His heavenly Father, but He knew more anguish than anyone who ever lived. When He faced the great horde of sin and death, Jesus pled in His weakness, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me” (Luke 22:42). Jesus wanted a less painful

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path than the cross. It is neither unusual nor sinful to experience moments of extreme distress in the face of the attacking horde. The enemy may be from without—terminal cancer, a lost job, unbelieving kids. The enemy may be from within—feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, or grief. There is wisdom in seeing and confessing your weakness.

Jehoshaphat did even more; he ended his prayer with a vote of delightful confidence in his sovereign God. He prayed expectantly, “but our eyes are on you” (2 Chron. 20:12). These simple words convey hope in God. When tempted to keep his eyes on that “great horde,” Jehoshaphat chose to gaze at his great God. Instead of spiraling down into sinful anxiety and fear, he looked up in awe at his faithful and powerful Lord. In a moment of profound misery, Jehoshaphat gladly chose to trust God. That’s joy.

The Lord defeated the invading armies. Jehoshaphat didn’t even need to lift his sword (20:17). But even if his army had been devastated, Jehoshaphat could still have rejoiced because his eyes weren’t on himself, they were on his God.

Years later, a greater king faced an even greater trial. Jesus prayed with delightful confidence. Jesus asked for another way than the cross. Jesus knew His Father planned the sword of His wrath to fall on Him, but He wanted a way out. Jesus asked for a change in His circumstances, but His eyes were on His Father. Thus, Jesus prayed, “nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” Jesus gladly chose to trust His Father. That’s joy.

As one who’s been redeemed, you know God is trustworthy. You realize your sin is a far greater threat than the horde Jehoshaphat faced. Because of that sin, you deserved the hurricane of God’s ferocious wrath to rage against you. But when you were truly hopeless and confused, Jesus stepped in front of this all-consuming storm, He stood in your place, and there He bore God’s

wrath for you. This is the confession of every Christian. This is the reason you know God is faithful. When you gladly choose to trust Him, no matter what's going on in your life, you have joy.

STOP LOOKING FOR JOY

What do we do during those seasons when we don't feel joyful? What's to be done when we know in our head God is good and kind and sovereign but our joy in God has gone AWOL? The answer may surprise you: Stop looking for it!

Have you ever heard the Greek myth about Tantalus? Zeus labeled him a thief and a traitor and sentenced him to agonizing punishment. Tantalus had to stand under the branches of a tree laden with ripe, delicious fruit while resting in a pool of cool water. Whenever Tantalus tried to pick the fruit, the gods moved the branches out of his reach. And when Tantalus knelt down to drink the refreshing water, the pool always dried up. From this story we gained the verb "to tantalize."

Joy is like Tantalus's fruit and water. You'll never get it by looking for it. To find joy you have to take an indirect route. Don't look for joy. Look to Christ. Pray like Jehoshaphat: "My eyes are on you, Lord."

Even when Paul commands us to rejoice, he's fundamentally calling us to place our confidence in who God is and what He's done. Paul's command to rejoice comes at the very end of his letter to the Philippians (4:4). This command comes after Paul acknowledged the good work of salvation God began and promised to complete (1:6). It comes after Paul recalled how earthly trials are nothing compared to heavenly hope (1:23). It comes after Paul recounted the high cost Christ paid to save an unholy people (2:8). It comes after Paul proclaimed his identity is not in

safety, reputation, or ministry, but in Christ alone (3:12). And it comes after he declared that no matter what happens in this life, our citizenship is in heaven (3:20).

In all these chapters, Paul deliberately placed the eyes of his readers on the trustworthy Savior. And only after doing this, only after pointing to God who is worthy of all our faith, did Paul finally command, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (4:4). It’s as if Paul is saying, “You must rejoice, and if you want to know how, revisit what I’ve just said: put your trust in Christ.”

The key to finding joy is to stop looking for it. Keep your eyes on Christ instead. Then watch and wait. Joy will come.

A WORD TO THOSE IN THE PIT

I love being a pastor. Before I ever went on staff at a local church, I recall having lunch at a Subway with my friend Bill. He had lots of questions about his future. He had a good education, a ton of ambition, and a love for Christ. We got to talk about his life and my life. Over lunch, we pointed one another to Christ. I realized this is what pastors do 24/7. Without a doubt, I wanted to make this my life. To this day, most of my lunches are spent with a member of my church talking about the Lord, the gospel, and our heavenly future. This is a wonderful peak of pastoral ministry.

There are valleys, too. I’m in the valley when I see a kid who grew up in the church now living with no hope in God and no trust in the gospel. I’m in the valley when I’m sitting before a brother whose life is falling apart because of his own sin, and he cannot escape the consequences. I’m in the valley when a church member on her way out tells me how the church failed her. These are the termites of pastoral ministry that gnaw at my joy.

There’s no silver bullet in the fight for joy because keeping

our eyes on Christ isn't easy, even for those of us paid to point others to the precious truths of the gospel. But with God's help, it's possible.

Maybe you are in the pit of depression right now. Like Jehoshaphat, you feel hopeless and confused. You want to look at the Lord, but you aren't sure how. There is hope for you. How?

Focus on Christ. There's nothing more important for you to do than wrap your mind around who Jesus is and what He's done. We never graduate out of Gospel 101. You know Jesus is reliable because it says so in His Word. You believe this Word because He saved you. Revisit the beauty, glory, power, and faithfulness of the life-giving Son of God. Recount the facts of the gospel. It's a message so simple a toddler can wade into it, and yet a message deep enough for an adult to swim around in it. As so many wise saints have said before, preach the gospel to yourself daily.

Surround yourself with people who speak a lot about Jesus. Not Facebook people, but real people. You will be greatly helped if the people in your life talk about Jesus as much as they talk about the latest ballgame or political intrigue. You may need to initiate these conversations. That's okay, your friends will follow suit, especially if you're a leader. Encourage your congregation to be rife with gospel-centered conversations. These are the arrows sharp enough to pierce the most joyless life.

Sing rich psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The next time you gather with God's people, take time to reflect upon the words you sing. To the extent these lyrics point the saints to Christ, they will lead the saints to joy. God uses good songs to stir the affections of our heart. For example:

O, well of joy is mine to drink, for my Lord has conquered death.

*Victorious forevermore. The ancient foe is laid to rest.
Hallelujah, Christ is King, alive and reigning on the throne.
Our tongues employed with hymns of praise, glory be to God
alone.*

—“O Fount of Love,” Matt Boswell

Labor in the Word and prayer. It sounds simple, but those who skim over Scripture and speed through prayer will catch only glimpses of the Savior. These brief sightings are not enough to find the joy you want. To mine for gold you need a sharp axe and strong arms. To look for Christ, you need an open Bible and worn knees.

The Westminster Divines got it right: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” In other words, you were built for joy. This is true. But joy will be found when you seek Christ, and not joy itself.

Living in the “Nevertheless”

LOVE, JOY, **PEACE**, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS,
FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, SELF-CONTROL

I'll never forget one of the first speeches I ever gave. My boss, a United States Senator, had been asked to address the inaugural meeting of a national, bioethics advisory commission. Since he couldn't attend, he sent me, a young staffer, in his place. A group of intimidating people filled the room: doctors, lawyers, scientists, and political professionals. I was a novice. My nerves rattled as I sat there in my grey suit. Beads of sweat gathering on my brow, my emotions overwhelmed me. I was in over my head.

I sprinted through my prepared remarks. Then, before anyone could respond, I nervously and awkwardly stood up, hoping if I exited the room quickly no one would remember how it went. As I shuffled back to the office, I felt no peace.

What I experienced that chilly October day isn't unusual. Everyone knows what it's like to be uneasy, out of sorts, anxious, and afraid. From the soldier deployed on his first overseas tour to the salesman about to make his first pitch, we've all had to reckon

with nerves that won't calm down, a heart beating out of its chest, and thoughts spinning out of control. Everyone longs for peace; very few know where to find it.

Life is full of disappointments. The biggest catastrophes (wars and tsunamis) and the smallest inconveniences (lower back pain and unfulfilled desires) infuse unrest into our lives. Trials snatch peace from us. It's not supposed to be this way. We know it. Whatever the trial, our gut tells us we aren't supposed to be crushed by anxiety, beaten up by worry, or battered by loneliness. More importantly, the Christian looks back to a day when humanity knew peace because sin had yet to invade the cosmos and everything God made was still "very good" (Gen. 1:31). In the midst of a world that knows no peace, we're left longing for rest.

What's true for the Christian is true for the shepherd.

PEACE AND SHEPHERDS

It had been a particularly hard few months. A number of marriages in the church were on life support. Many of these couples leaned into the body for wisdom, but nothing seemed to help. The aggregate effect of these counseling cases left me restless in bed—a rare occurrence for a man who can fall asleep at the speed of light and stay asleep through a hailstorm. I woke up at 3 o'clock in the morning, brainstorming ways I would try to help the next day. I longed for rest.

Pastoral ministry is not a nine-to-five affair. The clock never stops ticking on sin. All work is hard, but there is an unusual weight when the souls of men and women are your business. But people aren't projects you can manage from start to finish. We're all works in progress. For this reason, the pastor never feels like his job is done.

Some days, when I feel like I'm running on the proverbial hamster wheel, I especially want a sense of accomplishment, the kind of satisfaction that comes from building something. I'm not particularly handy, but I can appreciate the value of painting a room, repairing a machine, or just mowing the lawn. However, the pastor rarely sees the fruit of his labor.

In the 1840s, American writer Henry David Thoreau built his own cabin and planted a garden by Walden Pond just outside of Concord, Massachusetts. For more than two years, he supported himself entirely by the labor of his own hands. "I am convinced," Thoreau wrote, "both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime."¹ He knew the satisfaction that comes from holding a hammer and a shovel. He maintained himself with the sweat of his brow.

Shepherds rarely experience a similar sense of accomplishment. And to the extent the church is their work, they'll never see the finished product—at least not in this life. Like Moses prohibited from tasting the succulent grapes and figs of Canaan, the faithful pastor won't see the results of his labor in this life. He is left to trust that "in the Lord" his "labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

All this can leave Christian leaders particularly restless and often discouraged. You pour yourself into a college freshman, only to watch his gradual slide away from you, the Bible, and the Lord. You preach faithfully week after week, wondering whether it's making any difference in the lives of the people you serve. You counsel a couple for months, but the sessions don't keep the marriage intact. In the midst of a ministry whose worth is weighed in the next life, it's a struggle to be at peace in this life.

Peace is a precious piece of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). But it can be tricky to find. Meanwhile, we strive to trust the Lord and rest in His perfect will. This isn't easy, and it's why I often lack peace.

LIVING IN THE “NEVERTHELESS”

This lack of peace is a common but peculiar problem for Christians. The Bible is clear: God expects us to be at peace. Nearly every New Testament letter begins with a call for peace (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem. 3; 1 Peter 1:2; 2 John 3; 3 John 15; Jude 2; Rev. 1:4). Clearly, peace matters.

Peace doesn't come easily, because the road to glorification is steep and paved with jagged rocks. It's a painful trek, riddled with twists and turns. Paul and the first Christians faced devastating persecution. Mob violence racked the lives of these early preachers (Acts 21:36). It would have been easier for these Jewish-background believers to return to the warm environs of the synagogue. But they took the harder road, and in so doing they followed in the footsteps of their Savior. Jesus knew the cross beckoned Him. He prayed for a way out—a more “peaceful” path. Instead, He tasted the hard nails of a Roman execution.

Jesus wanted another way, but He wanted God more, so He willingly embraced death. Before the nails pierced Him, Jesus prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

Nevertheless. Like Jesus, Christians are supposed to live in the “nevertheless.” We are to accept whatever God allows, rest in whatever God sends, and confess with Samuel Rodigast, the seventeenth-century hymn writer,

*Whate'er my God ordains is right;
Though now this cup, in drinking,
May bitter seem to my faint heart,
I take it all, unshrinking.*

Every Christian, and certainly every Christian leader, is called to live in the “nevertheless.” We do this by trusting God in any and all circumstances. But how can we do this? How do we pursue peace? The answer is found first in understanding the root of peace.

Peace doesn’t come easily, because the road to glorification is steep and paved with jagged rocks. It’s a painful trek, riddled with twists and turns.

THE ROOT OF PEACE

While taking my kids to a nearby park, I saw a strange sight: three of my Asian neighbors standing before a grove of small trees, each with their eyes closed and palms outstretched toward the saplings. I watched as they finished their time of meditation. They certainly looked content. They seemed at peace with themselves and with the world around them. If a few moments of meditation before a tree can bring peace, what does Christianity have to offer?

When we hear the word, “peace,” we shouldn’t think first of relaxation—as tempting as it might be. Peace isn’t found on a tranquil beach or a spectacular forest vista. True peace is so much more than quiet contemplation. It’s more than calmness in the face of a speech or contentment in the midst of a trial. A sense of calm may be the *result* of peace, but it’s not the root.

Christian peace, the peace Paul lists as fruit of the Spirit, is something far more spectacular. From Genesis to Revelation, the root of peace is the atoning work of God. When you hear the word *peace*, think of God making a way for sinners to be reconciled to Him.

Peace, in the Old Testament, is the gift God gave those who

came to Him through the shed blood of sacrificed animals. This explains why some of those sacrifices were actually called “peace offerings” (Lev. 3). The psalmist rejoiced in these sacrifices, praying to the Lord, “you forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin” (Ps. 85:2). Looking at the temple, where God atoned for the transgressions of His people, the same psalmist saw “steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10). In other words, through the blood of a lamb without blemish, God replaced wrath with love, infidelity with faithfulness, sin with righteousness, and enmity with peace. A state of peace was the result of divine forgiveness.

In the New Testament, peace is the gift the Father grants those who come to Him through the shed blood of His Son. We all offend God, each and every one of us (Rom. 3:9–18). We all deserve God’s wrath because of our sin. Since God is love, He provided a way of escape. He delivered up Jesus “for our trespasses” and raised Him “for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). Those who were once God’s enemies, God now calls friends. How is this possible? Through the blood of Christ. And what is this called? Peace. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). True peace is reconciliation with God.

Most of the world is oblivious to this definition. They assume God is already on their side. Thoreau made peace with nature, but he had no interest in reconciling with his Maker. He didn’t think he needed to. On his deathbed, a family member asked if he had peace with God. Thoreau mocked his concern: “I am not aware that we ever quarreled.”² He was wrong. God has a quarrel with each of us, and peace will not come until the quarrel is resolved. This quarrel is due to our sin, and peace comes only with God’s blood-bought forgiveness.

Because the gospel is a message of peace (Acts 10:36; Eph. 6:15), our biggest problem is behind us. At its core, peace is not singing “Kumbaya” around a campfire with a dozen of your closest friends. It’s not going to work every day with the inner-confidence that all is well. Peace certainly isn’t the tranquil feeling manufactured by a few moments of silent meditation before a tree in the park. Everyone understands what you mean when you describe a stroll through a grove of dogwoods as “peaceful,” but real peace comes only through the atoning work of Christ.

Peace is the objective reality God adopted you into His family as His precious son or daughter. Peace is a fact—solid as granite—that because of the cross-work of Jesus, every believer is “sanctified in Christ,” and sustained “to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2, 8). In that sense, the pursuit of peace cannot be separated from the pursuit of Christ. And when you have found Christ, when the Son has put to death the Father’s quarrel with you, not only are you at peace, but the Spirit begins to work peace within you.

PEACE WITH OTHERS

If peace is a root, its branches will extend far and wide. Having been reconciled to a holy God, believers are reconciled to one another. This happened. It’s done. It’s the work of Christ who loves His bride, the church. There’s more to peace than the end of God’s wrath for my body; peace extends to the body of Christ. The cross accomplished peace vertically (between us and God). The cross also accomplished peace horizontally (between us and our brothers and sisters).³

Nonetheless, the peace we now *have* with one another is a peace we must not take for granted. This is Paul’s point in Ephesians,

where he urges us “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). This is a paradox. The peace is already there, we don’t have to find it, God gave it to us. On the other hand, it’s a peace we must be “eager to maintain.”

In a few days, my wife and I are going to a marriage conference. We’ll spend several hours together, studying God’s Word and reflecting on how our relationship can improve. Of course, my wife and I are *already* one. The day we said, “I do,” we became a family. God united us. Nonetheless, we have to strive to maintain that unity. I wouldn’t be a good husband if I took it for granted.

Imagine a husband who spends all baseball season glued to the television. His wife, fed up, blurts out, “Don’t you want time with *me*?”

He responds, “Sure, but I figured since we are already one it didn’t matter if I checked out and watched the game.” Bad answer. He needs to pursue peace in his marriage.

What’s true in a marriage is true in the church. Christians are called to live at peace with one another (Mark 9:50; Rom. 12:18; 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:13; Heb. 12:14; James 3:18; 2 Peter 3:14). In fact, our peace with God and one another cannot be separated. It’s impossible to be reconciled to God without peace spilling over into personal relationships. Notice how Paul connects the two in Ephesians 2:13–17:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby

killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near.

Under the old covenant, the “law of commandments and ordinances” privileged the Jews. But in Christ, the barrier between Jew and Gentile has been dismantled. Just as the fall of the Berlin Wall united East and West Germany, so now the walls that once divided humanity—ethnic, social, cultural, economic—have been demolished under the weight of Christ’s atoning death and resurrection. The church is now one body. In Christ, we are at peace both with God and with one another.

When we pray for the fruit of peace to overflow within us, we’re asking for more than the comforting awareness that God has reconciled us to Himself. We are asking for more than the reminder that we are now one body. We also want God’s help to pursue peace with others—inside and outside the church. “If possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). This means the peace-filled Christian will make every effort to apply the gospel to all the relationships in his or her life: spouse, kids, friends, neighbors, staff, and church family.⁴

What does this look like for you? A few, diagnostic questions are in order:

- Do you readily forgive those who wronged you, with the conviction that “so far as it depends on you” you must “live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18)?
- Do you cling to the smallest slight against you, or are you “slow to anger” since it is your “glory to overlook an offense” (Prov. 19:11)?
- Do you regularly “check in” with the people closest to you, recognizing the “purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out”

(Prov. 20:5)? If you are filled with the fruit of peace, you will initiate with family, friends, co-workers, and team members to be sure there are no unresolved issues that could gnaw at your relationship.

- Do you build relationships with people from all backgrounds (ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural) because you know “the gospel has made one new man in the place of the two” (Eph. 2:15)?

The church I serve has multiple staff members, and one of my responsibilities is to manage several of them. I used to think it was enough to hire the right people and simply let them do their job. I’ve come to realize the dynamics of church life demand a different approach. We aren’t just co-workers—we’re brothers and sisters in Christ. I’m not just their manager, I’m a co-elder and a friend. Therefore, it’s crucial that I initiate a relationship that goes beyond a to-do list of tasks to accomplish. If I fail to relate to them as my family, our staff culture will be one of division and unrest.

Relationships are hard work. The key is beginning with the root of peace. God, in His kindness, brought you into a state of peace with Him. God, by His grace, brought believers into a state of peace with one another. Now, according to God’s grace, we’re called to pursue peace with others.

PEACE WITHIN

The peace we have with God is foundational, and peace with others must be pursued. And yet, there’s another kind of peace the believer would be foolish to neglect. Notice the prayer Paul offers in Romans: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (15:13).

Too many believers—behind the pulpit and in the pews—are living without this peace that God promised to those who love Him. Perhaps it's because they've failed to ask for it. Perhaps they've taken their eyes off the root of peace. For whatever reason, they've not yet learned, as Paul did, "the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (Phil. 4:12).

The secret is to remember that those in Christ are redeemed and secure, safe and accepted. Those who have been justified by Christ are forever free to find their identity in Christ. It doesn't matter how bad the speech goes, how unkind your friend has become, or how uncertain your future plans are. The granite truth is you have been justified. If this is true, the mountains in your life that once seemed impassable are now pebbles you can barely see.

It's not that God will simply remove suffering from your life. Far from it. We know from God's Word the faithful will be persecuted and the godly will suffer (see Job; 2 Tim. 3:12). But when our vision of God is big and the root of peace remains in focus, our problems seem much smaller. They are still real. They may be painful. But they are no longer ultimate. In other words, when we are confident God decisively dealt with our sin, our external trials and personal weaknesses no longer overwhelm us—at least they don't have to.

This is why Paul was acutely aware of his own frailty but even more aware of God's strength: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing worth belongs to God and not us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:7–9). These are the words of a man who knew peace within.

But how does this peace within surface in the life of the shepherd?

PEACE FOR SHEPHERDS

I was young when I spoke to that bioethics commission in Washington. I had little experience in public speaking, I wanted to impress, and I didn't feel particularly confident in my performance. Not surprisingly, I carried several of the same issues into pastoral ministry. Getting behind the pulpit was a bittersweet experience. On the one hand, I appreciated the privilege of opening God's Word to God's people. I knew the church entrusted me with a sacred task, and I desperately wanted to honor my Savior by preaching His Word faithfully. That's the sweet part.

But there was a bitter part, too. I wanted approval. The congregation's opinion mattered to me. I remembered an illustration from my first pastor. He said every Christian is like a violinist, playing for an audience of one—God. Amen! I knew that to be true, but I felt like I was playing for the crowd that filled those pews on Sunday morning. Like my computer running two applications at the same time, as I preached my mind toggled between two missions. On one hand, I focused on preaching a solid, helpful, and biblical message. On the other hand, a slew of questions ran through my head: *How am I doing? Am I going too long? Do they know how nervous I am?* I know I'm not alone. The hunger for approval rages in the heart of more than one shepherd, and this is the cause of a lack of peace.

As one in ministry, you are responsible for a group of people. It may be a handful, it may be a few thousand. Regardless of your ministry's size, you are likely tempted to look for a sense of peace in the approval of the people you serve. If that's the case, every word of criticism, every departing member, and every ignored piece of counsel will feel like an attack on your competency, a bullet slicing through the armor of your self-worth.

Shepherds are like all other Christians. They need to remember

their biggest problem is behind them, killed by Christ. “This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14).

The highlight of my week is usually Friday afternoon, when I’m putting the finishing touches on my sermon. That’s when I’m meditating on the cross of Christ. It’s probably four or five o’clock. There’s a cup of lukewarm tea sitting on my left, a pencil-written manuscript on my right, and a glowing laptop in front of me. I’m typing out my sermon, but I’m also worshiping. In that moment, the gospel firmly fixed in my mind, I’m basking in the reality that Christ died for *me*. He is *my* Lord. *I* have been justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In that moment, as I’m preparing myself to preach God’s Word to God’s people, I preach it to myself. I declare to my own soul that my value isn’t found in how good a preacher I am but in how gracious a Savior I serve. I could lay an egg in the pulpit that Sunday morning, and everything would be okay.

Peace is for pastors, too. We won’t find it in conferences, retreats, or healthy churches. We can find it only in Christ’s atoning work. And when we do, it allows us to not only enter the pulpit (or the counseling office, or the college campus, or the seminary classroom, or the mission field) with a sense of peace built on Christ’s cross, but also lead the way in peacemaking. Peace with God never stops with the individual; it has a wonderful effect within the congregations we’re privileged to serve. In other words, peace makes us better shepherds.

GROWING IN PEACE

Pastors have a unique responsibility to model a cross-centered, peaceful life. It’s such a privilege. What can you do to both enjoy and exhibit the peace God has won for you through the cross?

Be a peacemaker. Is there someone in your congregation you avoid? That's evidence you have work to do. God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility. Take a lead pursuing peace in the church you serve.

Preach to yourself before you preach to the congregation. Go over your message in private, wrestling with the truths you're about to proclaim. Pray something like this: "God, make me in awe of the cross I'm about to declare. Help me to enjoy the peace I'm about to present to all who would humble themselves before you."

Realize you are not impervious to anxiety. It's one thing to know Christ is your peace and another to rest in Him. When you aren't resting, confess it. This is why you need a Savior, too. Indwelling sin will push you away from Christ, not into Him. If the anxiety in your heart is due to the sin on your hands, open up to someone you trust.

Beware the danger of finding "peace" in results. It doesn't work that way. Such so-called peace is a mere mirage, a temptress in disguise. A larger church, platform, or name will never bring you peace. Only Christ can do that. Seek Him.

REMEMBER THE CROSS

Praise God, I'm no longer scared of public speaking. It took a number of years to get here (sanctification is slow), but I'm much more self-forgetful in the pulpit than I used to be. Of course, I still wrestle with anxiety. Hardly a week goes by when I'm not overwhelmed by my many deficiencies.

But when I'm walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16) and pursuing the fruit of peace (Gal. 5:22), I remember I'm not fundamentally a preacher or a pastor. For that matter, I'm not fundamentally a husband, father, son, or friend. First and foremost, I'm a Christian

whose biggest problem is behind him. I’ve been “justified by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24). Jesus dealt with the wrath of God I deserve. He drank the full cup of God’s hurricane-like fury against me by hanging on that tree in my place.

I can live in the “nevertheless.”

When I’m tempted to think my sermon is not good enough or my ministry is lacking or my life is not what it ought to be, I remember the cross. Calvary is the root of my peace. Then, and only then, can I take a deep breath and keep moving. Then, and only then, can I stop to sing Rodigast’s famous lines:

*Whate’er my God ordains is right:
His loving thought attends me;
No poison can be in the cup
That my Physician sends me.*

**Preach to yourself
before you preach to the
congregation. Go over
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