





**The Point:** God calls us to strive for unity in the church in order to showcase the beauty of the cross.

**HIS STORY**

**Christians Are Unified in Christ**

Divided. Immature. Quarreling. These words describe the type of church Paul wrote to. Keep in mind that Paul was one of the original founders of this young church (Acts 18:1-11). However, after having spent eighteen months training them in the gospel, Paul continued on his missionary journey. It wasn't too long before he received reports of the immorality and disunity in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11).

Unity grounded in gospel convictions lasts; unity attached to personalities doesn't. When the church at Corinth had several leaders to follow—the church fragmented. The same can be true of churches today when we have multiple staff members or strong leaders in the church body. Even a church where everyone is unified behind the same leader has placed its unity in danger, which we often see when that leader leaves the church. But the gospel is unchanging. The gospel will not leave. The gospel will not accidentally or intentionally make us take sides. That is why unity is grounded in the gospel alone.

► **How does the gospel help us maintain unity despite being diverse in so many other ways?**

**The Cross of Christ is the Wisdom of God**

After showing that true unity can be found in Christ alone, Paul went on to show us the brilliance of the cross. From the world's perspective, the cross makes no sense. The Jews were looking for the signs of the Messiah. They thought he would be a glorious king who would rescue them in a powerful, obvious way. An uneducated, unimportant Man from Galilee—who willingly walked to His death—did not fit the part. The wisdom-seeking Greeks didn't buy it either. Nothing about this crucified Jesus looked wise.

**There is No Room for Personal Bragging**

Notice whom God has chosen. People who are not wise, not powerful, and not of nobility. People who are weak, insignificant, and despised. That doesn't make for a good résumé, does it? Why did God choose people the world looks past? Paul answered that question twice—so that no one can brag about his own doing, but instead about what the Lord has done (1:29,31). God's choosing reminds us of His grace—our salvation is not based on who we are or what we have done—and drives us toward humility. We cannot brag on ourselves because we have nothing worth bragging about in ourselves.

► **When have you been tempted to brag about something in your life that God clearly did? How can you turn that around and share about what He has done in your life?**

**Essential Doctrines**

**Body of Christ:** *The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. The church lives and operates as Christ's representative here on earth, with Christ as its head (Col. 1:18). This means the church is an extension of Christ's ministry, carrying out His work by fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). The picture of the church as the body of Christ also shows us the connection between individual Christians as members depend on each other for growth and sanctification (1 Cor. 12).*

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## YOUR STORY

- ▶ **How does the gospel help us maintain unity despite being diverse in so many other ways?**
- ▶ **What are some ways we draw attention to ourselves instead of Christ?**
- ▶ **Name a spiritual leader God has used to bring you closer to Him. What has this person taught you?**
- ▶ **How does the gospel allow you to see your gifts and talents and those of others in proper perspective?**

## YOUR MISSION

### Head

Believers should have godly examples to look to and imitate. According to Hebrews 13:7, these leaders should speak God's Word and live in accordance with the Word of God. These criteria help us to evaluate which leaders around us deserve our attention. Are they leaders who love God's Word and handle/interpret it properly? Are they leaders who not only speak God's Word, but also live it out in their everyday lives? If so, then we should look to these leaders and learn from them.

- ▶ **Who are some heroes of the faith you look to personally?**
- ▶ **Why is it important that the author of Hebrews instructed us to examine the outcome of a leader's faith before imitating him or her?**

### Heart

The bragging heart is a prideful heart, and we know how God feels about pride. Throughout the Bible, Scripture speaks of God opposing or resisting the proud, but giving grace and favor to the humble (Ps. 138:6; Prov. 3:34; Luke 1:52; Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). Why is that the case? Because pride and bragging are essentially a self-declaration of: "I'm good enough and don't need God." This is why we must constantly be on the lookout for pride and bragging in our lives so we can uproot them in our desire to pursue hearts of humility before God.

- ▶ **How might a personal focus on imitating the humility, service, and obedience of Christ bring greater unity to your church?**
- ▶ **What areas do you brag about in your own life that prevent you from a closer relationship with God?**

### Hands

We too often approach the body of Christ to be served by it. The church does serve as the hands and feet of Jesus, and we should receive from the church; however, many of us have the backward mindset that church is mostly about what we can get from the people of God, instead of holding on to a humble heart of service. Jesus Himself came not to be served but to serve, and this example of humility is what begins to unify us.

- ▶ **Why is it incorrect to only think of church as a place we go to receive something?**
- ▶ **What are some areas where you can begin to give back through serving those around you this week?**

## HIS STORY

### James Warned Against Favoritism

The first chapter of James ends with a call for Christians to keep ourselves unstained from the world. We are to be holy—which essentially means we are to be different. James carries that theme into chapter 2 by addressing one of the ways we often struggle with this—favoritism.

► **When have you struggled with showing favoritism among your friends, classmates, or siblings? Explain.**

### God's Kingdom is Not Like the World's Kingdom

Favoritism is not just evil because it is self-serving; it is far more sinister than that. Favoritism undermines the gospel itself. James reminded the church that God chose the poor of the world to be rich in faith (Psa. 68:10; Matt. 5:3). Through our neediness—financial, spiritual, and otherwise—we turn to seek help from others. And in that helpless state, the gospel takes root in the heart and begins to grow, and we begin to experience God's extravagant grace in our lives.

Yet God's calling is upside down from what this world values, esteems, and applauds. As we follow God with an eternal perspective, our goals, desires, and choices will (and should) look radically different from those who don't know Christ. The world will always demand our allegiance to the whims and trends of the time. Sometimes our Christian values and convictions will line up with the world order; Oftentimes, it will not. We must continually remember that this present world is not our home. We do not exist to be served, but to serve. Our lives are not our own, but are a sacrifice, an offering to our God.

► **How do your goals, desires, and choices reflect God's will for your life rather than the world's?**

### Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

James doesn't sugar-coat it: Favoritism is sin. Not only is being judgmental and showing partiality against the heart of God, these actions are hypocritical at their core. We each were rescued at our worst. We had nothing to offer Christ, yet He bore the wrath of God so we could be included in the family of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10). We were homeless, fatherless orphans without hope. But God rescued us from our poverty and granted us the riches of His eternal kingdom and the position of His beloved children. All we have is from God alone.

### Essential Doctrines

**God is Just:** *God establishes standards for His moral creatures that are in accordance with His righteousness, and they will be judged according to those righteous standards (Lev. 11:44-45; Rom. 2:5-11; 2 Cor. 5:10). It would be an injustice if God did not uphold His righteousness, because such a failure would require God to violate His own righteous character. Since humanity has sinned by failing to live up to God's righteous standards, God has taken it upon Himself to make provision by being both just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Christ (Rom. 3:25-26).*

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**The Point:** The church's identity as God's people causes them to live differently than the world.

## HIS STORY

### The Church as living stones

The first thing Peter said was for us to aggressively and urgently fight our sinful flesh. Yet all too often we find ourselves complacent, even comfortable, with our sinful patterns. Instead of waking up to the shock and terror of sin's presence, we cozy up to it and allow it to take over. Anger, selfishness, pride, and the list goes on.

Though we have been given right-standing with God through Jesus' sacrifice, we still have much work to do as we wait on the completion of God's work in us. We all have sin that clings closely to us, and Scripture continually commands us to take it down (Heb. 12:1). We have a race to run. A battle to fight. A lifetime of learning to live out the internal realities Christ provided us.

► **How can we better see the battle over sin as a moment-by-moment, urgent war rather than an occasional activity?**

### The church as a chosen people

Peter described us in four ways. First, we are a chosen race, or nation, a description linked to God forming a new nation through Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). The children of Israel were a people of common descent from Abraham, who had been chosen by God and set apart for His purposes. In the same way, the church is a people of common descent from Jesus Christ who has given us new life and made us new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17), and we have also been set apart for a purpose. Being a chosen race also affirms that our primary identity rests in who we are in Christ, not our ethnicity, nationality, or culture. Jesus' intention is that we be a people completely unified in Him (John 17:20-23). There is beauty when God's people who are full of diversity are truly one in Christ.

### The church as a heavenly people

One key to living out our new identity and purpose is to fully understand our new citizenship. We cannot live out the call to be holy with one foot in the conduct of the world and another in the lifestyle of Christianity. It is a false reality, because they are different from one another.

Each of the four preceding descriptions of the church—a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God's possession—remind us that we are fundamentally different from the world. We are, as Peter puts it, strangers and exiles. This is our new identity in Christ and our changed behavior should flow from this identity. Who we are should always be the root of our behavior.

► **Which of the three ways Peter taught us to live is most challenging for you?**

### Essential Doctrines

**People of God:** *Scripture describes the church as the people of God (2 Cor. 6:16). The church is created by God through the atoning death of Christ and is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. The term church is used in two senses. Church refers to individual local churches composed of people who have united together under the lordship of Christ and the universal church composed of all believers in Christ in all times. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God's ruling care while He protects and cares for us.*

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## HIS STORY

### God's Message is One of Love

Similar to the way the physical fruit of a plant is connected to its genetic identity, people's spiritual fruit is also connected to our genetic identity. All of mankind has inherited Adam's sin nature, so our corrupted spiritual DNA only leads to death, moral decay, and distance from God.

Only through Jesus does our spiritual DNA change. When we trust in Him, we are born to a new life, new identity, and new purpose. Our old state of death and decay is done away with, and in its place we are given eternal life and our spiritual transformation begins.

### God's People Are Marked by Their Love for Others

While the positive fruit of love is evidence of our new spiritual DNA, continuing in sinful practices evidence of a lack of change. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught on this problem (Matt. 5:20-22). The Scribes and the Pharisees were very religious people. They faithfully tithed of everything they owned and followed all the rules. They clung tightly to religion; if anyone could be called righteous, it was them. Yet Jesus said their righteousness was not enough. Only the righteousness of Jesus, which exceeds what they had shown, would be sufficient. In other words, Jesus said no one does good on his or her own (Ps. 14:3)—not even those who look like “good” religious people.

Jesus, fully God and fully man, lived the perfectly obedient life we could never live. Then He died the death we all deserve, paying the penalty of wrath our sin earned us. When He rose from the grave, He defeated death so we could have new life and spend eternity with God. And when we come to Christ in faith that His work—His perfect life, sufficient sacrifice, and powerful resurrection—as our only hope, a great and glorious exchange occurs.

### The Example of Christian Love is Found by Looking to Jesus

Later John explained that we love others because God first loved us (1 John 4:11,19). God sent His Son to show us His love for us. Christ walked to the cross to show His love for us. God raised Jesus from the dead to provide a way for us to experience this love. God began the journey of love we experience through Christ, but it ought not stop with us.

### ► What are some practical ways you can show love to the people around you?

### Essential Doctrines

**God is Love:** *Saying God is love means God is the essence of love or that perfect love resides and resonates within God Himself—one God in three Persons. The imperfect love that human beings share between one another is a dim reflection, a sign that points to the perfect love that resides within God. God's greatest act of love toward humans isn't the giving of earthly goods but the giving of Himself in Christ so that we might become reconciled to Him.*

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## YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What are some changes God has made in you since you became a Christian?**
- ▶ **When was a time when you were able to love someone and the only explanation for that love was the work of Christ within you?**
- ▶ **How does the reality of Christ's right standing with God, which has been given to you, change how you think about loving others?**
- ▶ **What are some practical ways you can love others according to the love you have been given?**

## YOUR MISSION

### Head

It only takes one difficult relationship to see how the love we are called to exhibit is not something we can build up on our own. Loving others like Christ loved us can only be done with supernatural power. This is why nonbelievers are unable to truly display the fruit of love. Why? First, the power of the Holy Spirit is not within them. And second, true and genuine love seeks for others to be happy in God, the source of all love. Thus, the call to love is a calling they can never carry out.

- ▶ **How does the world's love differ and fall short of God's love?**
- ▶ **Why should love always seek to lead people to the source of love—God?**

### Heart

Remember the story of Cain and Abel? Both made a sacrifice yet God only accepted Abel's as righteous. Abel is listed in the hall of faith, which says Abel's sacrifice was a more acceptable sacrifice because of his faith (Heb. 11:4). Since we know our salvation is never by the works we do but by faith (Eph. 2:8-9), we must assume that though Cain and Abel both obediently sacrificed, only one did so with the undercurrent of faith: Abel. Cain's offering was given without heart, without faith, and without love.

- ▶ **What most often prevents you from showing love to others?**
- ▶ **How does the Bible's teaching on love challenge the way you previously viewed it?**

### Hands

Body How do we love others with God's love? Here are five actions to consider as we strive to show the world around us the love of Christ.

1. Pray: Regardless of age or ministry training, we can all pray.
2. Pay attention: We don't need to look too far to know people with needs.
3. Share the gospel: As we seek to minister to those around us, we should be a continual source of gospel truth.
4. Provide for those who are where you cannot be: Get involved by supporting missionaries and organizations who are sharing Jesus' love with the nations.
5. Share the needs with others: As you see needs, pray for them and provide for them, but don't forget to tell others too. Invite others to get involved in the act of love.

- ▶ **Which of these actions comes most natural to you?**
- ▶ **Which of these is the best next step for you to work toward?**

## HIS STORY

### Pastors Should Set an Example

Paul lists what was supposed to mark Timothy's ministry (vv. 12-16). First, Timothy was to set an example. A major way pastors lead churches to grow is through the examples they set. Timothy may have been considered a younger leader, but his age was not to be an excuse failure to set an example for his church, even the members who were much older.

In what ways was Timothy supposed to be an example? He was an example outwardly in speech and in conduct. Speech would of course include clearly communicating the Word of God, but Paul meant much more. Paul wanted Timothy to be known for wise words rather than harsh rants. Today, this could include refusing to post outrage on social media, choosing instead to speak words of grace and compassion, and so on. Paul also encouraged Timothy to set an example inwardly through building traits of love, faith (or faithfulness), and purity (both sexual and general integrity).

► **What are some ways you personally could choose to follow the advice Paul gave to Timothy in these verses?**

### Pastors Should Faithfully Teach the Word

Employing athletic and military metaphors, Paul reminded Timothy it's not how you start in ministry but how you finish that matters most. Paul fought the good fight, he finished the race, and he kept the faith. Don't get confused by Paul's use of metaphors here. He was not calling for needless arguing with people in the church or giving permission for fist fights! Pastors should not be theological snobs who believe rightly but are jerks about it when preaching, teaching, and talking with others.

### Pastors Point People to Christ

Paul first reminded Titus of a fundamental conviction of Scripture—the belief that all are accepted by God through faith in Jesus. Scripture clearly indicates the requirement of faith in salvation and the danger of unbelief. What this means is that salvation is available to all who believe—no matter their ethnicity, social status, language, or any other factor.

### Essential Doctrines

**Inspiration of Scripture:** *The inspiration of Scripture refers to God directing the Bible's human authors as they composed and recorded His message to humankind in their original writings (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). Occasionally this inspiration was achieved through dictation, meaning God spoke directly to the original authors. However, this inspiration came most often through the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit and personalities of the authors so that their writings can be considered the very words of God.*

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## HIS STORY

### The Good News of the Resurrection

By this time in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul had addressed several ongoing sins and struggles in the church. Therefore, he ended by reminding them of the great antidote for all of their troubles—the gospel. Paul was writing to a group of believers who had already received the gospel, yet they needed a reminder that the gospel is central for all of life. The gospel is not just what begins new life and a relationship with Christ, it also shapes daily life in Christ. The church in Corinth was clearly not living out the gospel—they were experiencing divisions in the church, sexual immorality, bragging of all kinds (especially about spiritual gifts, knowledge, eloquent speech, and status), greed, and idolatry. In other words, they were building their lives, hope, and status on things other than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

► **What are some things you're sometimes tempted to build your life around, other than Jesus?**

### The Resurrection is Both Historic and Physical

Remember, the entirety of the Christian message hinges on the truth that Jesus resurrected from the dead. If Jesus did not rise, we are still left in our sin. If Jesus did not rise, death has the last word. In this sense, our lives don't validate the gospel, but the gospel validates and transforms our lives. All of the aspects of the gospel, such as Jesus' sinless life and sacrificial death, are vital. But this part—the resurrection—is what gives us our greatest confidence and hope in the entirety of the gospel. Paul focused on the resurrection in this passage, because the resurrection is the means of a transformed life.

### Jesus' Resurrection Points to Our Own

The framework of creation, fall, redemption, and renewal is central to the gospel story that runs throughout the pages of Scripture. From cover to cover, this framework plays a significant role in how we understand God's active work in all of creation. This part of the framework—renewal—is what Paul focused on next.

Renewal is Jesus' future act when He will restore all things to God's intended design. Renewal speaks of completion and restoration—completion of the gospel story and restoration when everything God created as good in Genesis 1–2 will once again measure up to that standard. All of God's work is moving toward this end.

### Essential Doctrines

**Resurrection:** *The Old and New Testaments both teach that believers will one day experience a resurrection of the body from the dead (Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:12-14; John 11). The promise of the resurrection is found in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and it will take place at the future return of Christ. Because Christ was the firstfruits of the resurrection, Christians can be assured that their resurrection will be similar in nature, meaning it will be both bodily and glorious (Rom. 8:22-23; Phil. 3:20-21). The hope of the future resurrection gives Christians confidence that death has been defeated in the death and resurrection of Christ.*

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**YOUR STORY**

- ▶ How does remembering the past, present, and future implications of the gospel help you live your life daily?
- ▶ How should Jesus being the firstfruits frame how we think, feel, and act in daily life?
- ▶ What impact does the future resurrection of the lost have on your life today?
- ▶ How can we speak into our culture to share the hope of the end of sin and death and completion of all things through Christ?

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**YOUR MISSION**

**Head**

People always wondered how basketball legend Larry Bird made such complex plays look so simple. His answer was also simple—he never got over the fundamentals. Bird’s meticulous practice of the fundamentals, or the “simple stuff,” of basketball showed up in the way he played in games. Similarly, Paul states that the gospel is of first importance—it is central to our faith. The gospel is the fundamentals of our faith—the “simple stuff” we need to dwell on each day.

- ▶ According to 1 Corinthians 3-5, what basic content of the gospel do we need to remember daily?
- ▶ How does remembering the power of the gospel give you hope in God’s transforming work in your life?

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**Heart**

Paul said Christians should be pitied more than anyone else if the resurrection never took place. Of course, Paul was certain the resurrection occurred, and he was able to persevere in the hardships and sufferings he encountered on a daily basis (2 Cor. 11:21-28). However, he also wanted to make it clear that Christians would be pitied if the resurrection never happened because of the radical heart and life change for believers. In other words, believing in the resurrection and following Christ will involve taking up our own crosses to follow Him—it’s not just merely a belief with no impact on our lives.

- ▶ How does your life demonstrate you are a genuine follower of Christ?
- ▶ How does our future resurrection give us strength to endure difficulties now?

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**Hands**

While the resurrection gives us confidence in our faith in Christ and gives us hope for what lies ahead, the resurrection is not all about us. The resurrection also encourages us to lift our eyes, look around us, and see the many who are still in desperate need to experience what we have—salvation through Jesus. As we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection, we should rejoice; however, we should also be broken by the world around us and resolve to share this good news with as many as we can.

- ▶ How can we become more mindful of the people around us because of our belief in the resurrection?
- ▶ Who do you know needs to hear the good news that God will one day create all things new?

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## HIS STORY

### From Slaves to Sons

If we are in Christ, we are no longer slaves to the flesh. We have been freed by Christ, and the Spirit enables us to put to death any lingering works of the flesh. Christians can still sin, but the gospel changes us so that we don't have to. The chains of the flesh have been broken.

Because of this, we are also no longer slaves to something else—fear. In Christ, there is no reason to fear being rejected by God. Our ongoing struggle with the flesh will not end in us being separated from God. Why? Because the spirit of adoption has replaced the spirit of slavery. We are now God's sons and daughters.

► **What does it mean not to live according to the flesh? Does that mean Christians should expect never to sin? Why or why not?**

### From Suffering to Glory

Just as the world is frustrated and in pain, so are we. As Paul wrote about God's plan to restore fallen creation (to a state even better than Eden), he connected men and women—the crown of God's creation—to His restoration as well. We are frustrated and in pain too; we suffer, we experience trials and injustice, we sin, and we grow older. But just as a new earth will come, so will new bodies for God's children. If we have been made joint-heirs with Christ, it is because we have died with Him and live with Him. And though we will die someday, we will be resurrected.

► **What are some frustrations and pains you experience?**

### From death to life

Paul described a courtroom drama unfolding to drive home the reason for his confidence. We are pictured in the defendant's seat, and God Himself is the judge behind the bench. Paul first asked who would bring an accusation against us to the Judge. The answer is no one, because God is the One who justifies and can answer any charge brought against His own. Next, Paul asked who could reach a guilty verdict and condemn? Again, the answer is no one, because Jesus paid our sentence in His death and resurrection, and He intercedes on our behalf. Finally, Paul asked who could carry out a guilty sentence and separate us from the love of Christ. Once again, the answer is no one or no thing. Even if an accusation could be brought, even if a guilty verdict could be given, there is no way we can be separated from God's love.

### Essential Doctrines

**Adoption:** *Adoption into God's family is one the positive benefits of justification. We are pardoned from the judgment against us through justification and experience a change of identity—we become children of God (John 1:12; Gal. 4:5). Adoption restores our relationship with God, which was once lost through the fall. Adoption also gives believers the benefits of being heirs of God and coheirs with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17).*

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## YOUR STORY

- ▶ **How does the assurance of your adoption into God’s family influence the way you see yourself and live?**
  - ▶ **How does it encourage you to know that Jesus is making all things new?**
  - ▶ **How does God’s plan for the world determine how we treat it now?**
  - ▶ **What are you particularly worried about right now in your life? How does the gospel of God’s love speak to that situation or anxiety?**
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## YOUR MISSION

### Head

At the moment of salvation, the Holy Spirit awakened our hearts to receive Christ; He began to dwell within us and establish Christ’s lordship in our lives. After that happens, we don’t relate to God as slaves or servants who are trying to work off a debt. We are no longer burdened by the reality that there is nothing we can do to make up for a debt with eternal consequences. We aren’t plagued with fear that we haven’t done enough. Instead, we relate to God as a loving Father. We are not in debt to Him because Christ has paid the debt for us. And by His virtue, we become heirs alongside Him.

- ▶ **Why do you think so many Christians think of their relationship with God in terms of “pay back?” Is this instinct all bad? Why or why not?**
  - ▶ **Why is it important for us to maintain the gospel truth that the debt of sin is paid while not lapsing into the sin of thinking we don’t need to obey God at all?**
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### Heart

Romans 8 sends up a resounding hallelujah, giving us words of worship we can use to respond to all God has accomplished without us, but also for us (vv. 31-39) . In short, Paul praised because, although he was dead apart from Christ, in Christ he would be totally, eternally, and irreversibly alive.

- ▶ **How can the gospel cultivate in believers a profound humility and confidence at the same time?**
  - ▶ **By ending this passage with poetic verse, Paul reflected how “life in Christ” is understood as worship. How does thinking about our daily lives this way transform our view of the Christian life?**
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### Hands

The key to living through anything we experience in life is to keep our focus on what is in store. We are beloved children of God, waiting for the completion of God’s irreversible promises to us. This is our motivation to live purposefully for the gospel, through the power of the gospel. This is the joyful news we have to share. This is why we patiently endure suffering and life’s difficulties, not with a plastic grin, but with genuine peace, joy, and confidence because this world is temporary.

- ▶ **How should Christians’ view of difficulties differ from the unbeliever’s view?**
  - ▶ **What are some current difficulties in your life that you can face by focusing on Jesus and His love for you?**
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**HIS STORY**

**We Now Have Fellowship with Christ**

Through the power of the gospel, we are never truly alone, even when no one else is around. Our God is always with us; His Spirit has taken up residence in us, and we are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). This is what it means that God called us into fellowship with Jesus. We are personally connected now in an eternal, unbreakable relationship with Him.

► **Describe a time when you felt you had true community or fellowship. How does fellowship with Christ differ from that? How is it similar?**

**We Now Have Fellowship with Others**

The primary “death” in the fall of mankind is the death of our relationship with God. Because of sin, we are separated from Him. Even Adam and Eve’s sin didn’t just separate them from God individually; it separated them from each other as well (Gen. 3:16). Sin influences all relationships.

So, the gospel doesn’t just unite us to God in Christ, but it unites us to God together in Christ. When we are brought into fellowship with Jesus, we are also brought into fellowship with all other people who are reconciled in Christ. The New Testament refers to this community of reconciliation in Christ as the church. The New Testament frequently shows the reconciling work of the gospel in community, but one of the most vivid—at least in showing how the gospel works practically in relationships of reconciled sinners in the church—is found in Romans 12:9-18.

**We Now Have A Common Mission**

While the gospel may save us as individuals, it does not save us to an individualistic faith. What has reconciled, makes us ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). This means we are not following through on our own gospel union with Christ if we aren’t joining the church on mission to share this gospel with those who don’t know Him. Being part of the church is not above and beyond God’s calling for a Christian; it is not the “icing on the cake.” Partnering with other believers requires us to unite around the gospel, set aside or work through all other differences, and sacrificially pursue our shared mission together. This is not an extra requirement; it is at the core of the gospel.

► **What are some ways you can begin looking at your small group, church, or youth group as a partnership in sharing the gospel?**

**Essential Doctrines**

**Union with Christ:** *Believers’ union with Christ is at the heart of salvation. The Bible describes salvation as entering into a covenant relationship with God and describes the church (which is made up of believers) as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23-32). Christians believe Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Christ in us) and that we dwell in Him (Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27; 3:1-4). This union is permanent; it will last for all eternity.*

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## YOUR STORY

- ▶ **Do you ever struggle with feelings of loneliness? Where and how do you seek encouragement to fight against it?**
- ▶ **Why do you think many people don't connect their own sense of loneliness to their lack of a relationship with God?**
- ▶ **Looking at the church of Rome as an example of a church centered on the gospel, what areas do you see today's churches struggling with the most? What is most difficult for you? Why?**
- ▶ **In a world full of broken relationships, how does it make you feel to know that God knows you completely and at the same time accepts you eternally?**

## YOUR MISSION

### Head

Our sin and selfishness drive us toward isolation and our culture only adds to it. We want to be in meaningful community—to enjoy fulfilling relationships—but we can't on our own. But God has made a way—the way—to experience relationship with Him and with others that satisfies the deepest longings of our souls. That way, of course, is through Christ. Because of Christ, we are brought into relationship with God and community with one another.

- ▶ **How does a right relationship with God create the opportunity to have meaningful relationships with other people?**
- ▶ **What are some daily habits and choices that lead us toward isolation from others? What are some changes we can make in those areas?**

### Heart

The gospel is God's love revealed, and the church is the gospel of God's love made visible. And God's love cannot make us prideful, selfish, arrogant, rude, gossipy, or accusers. So the more we press into the gospel, the more the gospel takes over our hearts, the more we will see something similar to what occurred in Romans 12:9-18.

- ▶ **What do we stand to lose if we seek to honor others ahead of ourselves? What do we stand to gain?**
- ▶ **What would it look like in the community life of your group and church to outdo each other honoring others?**

### Hands

Many Christians have their understanding of the church upside down. Having been saved as individuals, they tend to see their faith only as something personal—private even—and struggle to embrace the importance and depth of being a partner in the gospel with others. They attend church, but might not truly invest in the work of the church. Or they might partner in the work of the church in safer, somewhat distanced ways such as through giving money, but not through serving.

- ▶ **Why do you think it is sometimes difficult to move away from individualism and toward the mission of the church?**
- ▶ **What does the idea of being a partner on gospel mission mean for your daily routines—at school, home, and so on?**

## HIS STORY

### Walk by the Spirit, Not by the Flesh

Paul wrote because he was concerned about the Galatian church and how they were teetering on the edge of self-righteousness. They had been influenced by false teachers (the Judaizers) who insisted that justification comes by the gospel plus some work on our part (in this case, circumcision). This is what it means to “fall from grace”—we don’t have to fall into some terrible sin, but we can divert our thinking from justification by faith to justification by works. Paul was essentially saying, “If you were born again by the Spirit, you ought to walk according to that Spirit.”

We follow the Spirit when we walk by the Spirit. When we walk by the Spirit, how we live will change. The desires of the flesh and walking by the Spirit take us in completely opposite directions—so change is inevitable. So, let’s walk by the Spirit, since the Spirit has indwelt us and is bearing fruit in us that glorifies Christ.

- **Why do you think it’s so important to be still, pray, and read God’s Word in order to understand where the Holy Spirit is leading you?**

### Cast Off the Works of the Flesh

Notice how little Paul left out. Even in this relatively short list, hatred was listed alongside promiscuity, divisiveness along with drunkenness. Paul mentioned sins that often happen outside the church and sins that often occur inside the church. Paul noted sins that are obvious (carousing, sorcery) and sins that can be deceptive and subtle (envy, selfish ambition). Nobody was left out of this indictment. Every person’s scorecard was stained here, and Paul’s list is far from exhaustive.

- **What are some things that make it difficult to always follow the Spirit?**

### Display the Fruit of the Spirit

Doing flows from being. We behave according to who or what we think we are at any given moment, whether we see ourselves correctly or not. You can’t get away from this concept in the pages of Scripture. Biblically speaking, this means that when we embrace our identity in Christ, His power enables us to live accordingly.

As the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control within us, we will also see that our external lives will change. A person who is loving will act in loving ways. A person who is joyful will act joyfully before others. Being leads to doing. And in this case, when we are changed to be more like God on the inside, we will live more like Him on the outside.

- **Which spiritual fruit do you find yourself growing more in? Which do you need to grow more in? How do you know?**

### Essential Doctrines

**Sanctification:** *After we are justified by faith—declared to be in right standing with God through the righteousness of Christ—we undergo a lifetime of sanctification, meaning we are continually made more like Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26; 2 Thess. 2:13). Scripture speaks of sanctification as a present position (we have already been sanctified) and as a continuing process. Sanctification affects the whole person, transforming the heart, mind, and character to reflect Jesus.*

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## HIS STORY

### Identifying Our Enemy

The first rule of warfare is practical awareness of the enemy. You can't fight well if you don't know who you're fighting or if you don't know where they are. Knowing your enemy's character (what they're willing to do) and their position (where they may be attacking you from) are key components to successful warfare. Paul mentioned two very important things here. First, he said that our enemy is the Devil, not other people. This is important because we often mistake the unbelieving world as our battle targets, but Paul said we don't fight against "flesh and blood."

### Standing Firm in Battle

The battlefield doesn't always look like we think it should. Sometimes the devil even tries to distract us from focusing on Jesus while we're walking to our lockers or trying to get to class. Sometimes, he even tempts us in areas where we're vulnerable and weak while we're standing in church on Sunday, singing along to the hymns. The enemy often hits us where we're weak when we least expect it.

We have to become accustomed to seeing all areas of our lives as the place of the greatest spiritual battle. Remember when Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan? He was hungry and tired, having spent forty days fasting in solitude. The first way Satan tempted Jesus was by trying to convince Him to turn stones to bread and satisfy His hunger. You and I are tempted like this every day. No, not necessarily with food and drink, but to find our ultimate satisfaction in something or someone other than God.

- ▶ **Why do you think the shield that protects us from the devil is our faith and not our works?**
- ▶ **In what way does salvation serve as a helmet?**

### Prevailing in Prayer

Paul ended his examination of the spiritual armor by calling on us to infuse the battles we fight with prayer. However, we have to be very careful about the way we do this.

The power doesn't come from us; it comes from God Himself. The Holy Spirit inspires, empowers, receives, and applies our prayers. When you're frustrated in school, irritated with your family, triggered by a reminder of your past, tripped up by a recurring sin, or depressed by an inconsolable loneliness, that "great power" is not something that comes to you naturally. It isn't found "within"—at least, not within your natural self. We also need to stay alert about this truth.

### Essential Doctrines

**Angels:** Other than humans and animals, the Bible mentions other beings God created—angels (who are also referred to in Scripture as "sons of God"), "holy ones," "spirits," "principalities," and "powers." In the original languages of the Bible, the word angel carries the meaning of a messenger, which indicates one of their primary reasons for existence. However, angels carry out a number of other functions throughout Scripture: bringing God glory, carrying out God's plans and purpose, and reminding humanity that the unseen world is real.

**Demons:** Demons are angelic beings who sinned against God and continually work evil in the world today (Job 1:6; Zech. 3:1; Luke 10:18). Demons oppose God and seek to destroy His work. The Bible even describes Satan, the head of demons, as one who seeks to "steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). Though demons have power, they are limited by God's control and can only act within the constraints of what God allows. In the end, all demons will be cast into the lake of fire, which was originally created for this purpose.

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## YOUR STORY

- ▶ **Why can it be so tempting for us to take the fight to other people instead of the true enemy?**
- ▶ **When can we be tempted to take off our armor? Why?**
- ▶ **What are some ways you have found strength from the Lord to withstand the attacks of the enemy?**
- ▶ **Why is it important to remember that the armor of God corresponds to things only God has done or only God can provide? What would happen if we tried to protect ourselves with our own accomplishments or skills?**

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## YOUR MISSION

### Head

Because we are engaged in a spiritual war, we need spiritual weapons to protect ourselves and fight our enemy. This is why we must wear spiritual armor constantly. We should never take it off because you don't take your armor off in war; You take off your armor only when there is peace. You don't try putting on your seat belt when you see the eighteen-wheeler coming right toward you at 60 mph; you put it on before you leave the garage. Likewise, don't wait for the enemy to show himself before you start suiting up. You don't know when the attacks will come, but you know they will.

- ▶ **Do you approach the Christian life with a wartime mindset? Why or why not?**
- ▶ **What are some daily habits we can put into place that will remind us about suiting up for spiritual battle?**

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### Heart

Paul used the image of a Roman soldier in this section, which the first readers would have understood quite well. A Roman soldier's shield was about two feet wide and over four feet tall—large enough to protect most of his body. Faith in God protects us in the same way. Faith will protect us even when the battle seems impossible to win or seems to be lost.

- ▶ **Why is it important to remember that our “good deeds” aren't what protect us, rather it's our faith in God?**
- ▶ **What are some other parts of God's armor that stand out to you? Why?**

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### Hands

When it comes to fighting with prayer, we can't miss how God wants us to prevail. We are to prevail in the same way that Paul desired—in advancing the gospel. With all of the talk about being protected with armor, we cannot forget that our mission is to advance the gospel, not protect it. Our prayers must be centered on this reality. We are protected so that we can stand firm against the enemy's attacks. Then, as God's armor repels each one, we make the gospel known to those around us.

- ▶ **Paul mentioned the need for boldness two times. Why do you think boldness will serve us as we advance the gospel?**
- ▶ **What does your prayer life look like today? How can you strengthen it in the coming weeks?**

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## HIS STORY

### The Call to be Generous

For Paul and the Macedonian churches, casting aside greed and discontentment and spreading the love of God through sacrificial generosity made perfect sense because it was rooted in what Jesus did for us. Jesus was rich, but for our sake, He became poor so we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). Paul wasn't talking about money—that is too trivial of a way to measure poverty and wealth. Instead, Paul had Jesus' richness in glory in mind. The Son of God left His place of honor and glory with the Father (His riches) and became poor when He took on flesh and dwelt on earth with sinful people whom He had created. It was through His poverty that we exchanged our spiritual poverty for the riches of salvation.

- ▶ **Since generosity demonstrates the genuineness of our love, what does your generosity say about your love for others? About the state of your heart?**
- ▶ **What can you do to have a more godly approach to generosity in the future?**

### God's Gifts Are Meant to be Shared

God does not give us the wealth of His grace for us to greedily keep it to ourselves. The same grace that gives our salvation impacts our witness. This is why Paul wrote about finishing the task.

Why should people with surplus share with those who lack so that all may have some? Because we are all people made in God's image, standing equally in need of the gospel before the only holy God. Paul put this in spiritual context when he described monetary and material generosity as reflections of the gospel. We can financially and materially raise others up in a way that reflects our equality as persons—within the church, of course—to reflect our equal status as brothers and sisters in Christ. Thinking of it this way, we now worry much less about who hasn't "earned their keep" or worked as hard as we have for what we've achieved. All notions of earning and achieving go out the window when we realize we've been given an inheritance in heaven that nothing can destroy.

### God Desires Cheerful Generosity

The Bible tells us that man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). This is why the widow was praised for her tiny offering (Luke 21:1-4)—not because what she gave was impressive, but because she gave with real generosity, sacrifice, and joy. In contrast, the one who gives a large sum of money, but gives with strings attached, has not given much at all.

### Essential Doctrines

**Moral Influence Theory of Atonement:** *According to this theory, Jesus' sacrifice should be seen as a demonstration of God's love, a display that produces a change of attitude within humanity. This theory is only part of what Christ accomplished on the cross, since it leaves out God's wrath against sinners and His requirement of satisfaction for sin. Still, it does remind us that the cross is the greatest example of God's love—a love that must provoke gratitude and praise on our behalf.*

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## HIS STORY

### Defining Faith

Before we look at how faith should work itself out in our lives, we should probably first define faith itself. It's no good pushing forward in a study of faith if we don't know what faith actually is.

#### ► How would you define faith?

According to the author of Hebrews, faith is "the reality of" something which currently cannot be seen. This is why Paul said the Old Testament patriarchs were justified by their faith in the promise—a promise that had not been seen (Rom. 4). The Old Testament saints hadn't seen the object of their salvation (yet), but they trusted in God's promise to one day provide it—and He did in Jesus Christ.

#### ► How does it affect you to know that even if you wanted to, you couldn't buy righteousness through your own works?

### Examples of Faith

So it is faith alone, not our works, that justifies; however, this doesn't mean we don't work! We know that faith alone justifies, but we also know the faith that justifies is never alone. In other words, faith without works isn't really faith.

What is the place of works in the Christian life? Well, works aren't optional or random. The Bible says we were created for good works (Eph. 2:10), so Christians must work—it's part of our very purpose Christ-followers. Still, we have to see our good works in the revealing light of grace, together with the vital doctrine of "faith alone." We have to understand that our good works are not done to repay God for what He has done or for our own glory.

### Enduring in Faith

What is it that can hold us back as we run and so easily ensnare (trap) us? The obvious answer is sin. When we take our eyes off of Jesus and fix our gaze on the world around us, we set ourselves up to fall (or even dive) into sin. Even sin that has been forgiven can be a crushing weight that will trip us up and hold us back.

Still, sin is not the only thing we need to be concerned about. Even good things can distract us from focusing on Jesus. The author of Hebrews says to focus our eyes on Him (12:2). Why did the author say this? I think it's because it's easy to pursue spiritual disciplines, religious efforts, and theological studies as the end game. We want to look more holy, be more knowledgeable, or seem more put together. This is not walking or running by faith at all; this is works-based self-righteousness.

#### ► How does Jesus keeping His faith all the way to the cross encourage your faith?

### Essential Doctrines

**Faith:** *Biblical faith is the resting, or trusting, in Christ alone for salvation (John 3:16-21). More than being a mental agreement of historical facts, genuine faith begins with a recognition and confession of the truth of the gospel (1 John 4:13-16), followed by receiving Christ as Lord and Savior of one's life (John 1:10-13). Biblical faith is not blind faith because it rests on the historical life, death, and resurrection of Christ.*

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