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Preparing Your Church for Suffering

Philippians 3:8-14

Prayer: *Father, again I was just thinking of what we just sang, we are asking the Holy Spirit to fill us, and Lord that's my prayer this morning. I pray for your precious Holy Spirit to fill us now, Lord, as we are opening up your book, if we don't have the filling of your Holy Spirit, we are wasting our breath, wasting our time. And so we pray for your Spirit to be here, inhabit your word, give us the ability as we look into it to make it of value, to make it of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well we were left with some questions last week at the end of last week's message and the question we left us with was: Have you been disciplined in a faith that takes seriously the apostle Paul's words that to suffer for Christ is gain? We spoke about Paul's great desire, the desire that motivated his life, and that was that he would know Christ. We spoke about three different pathways to knowing Christ: It was an historical pathway, there's a doctrinal pathway and there's the pathway of intimacy with Christ. I pointed out that that doorway to intimacy with Christ is one that is

oftentimes marked with suffering. And we asked the question: Are we ready to suffer the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order to gain Christ?

And we spoke of how real that doorway to suffering is going to be in the lives of believers. We saw that there's lots of different similarities between what happened years ago in the Soviet Union and what's happening today here in our country. The Soviet Union promulgated the lie that there is no God and that it was in fact god. Every citizen had to live with that lie in order to function. We looked at Rod Dreher's book *Live Not by Lies* and we saw how he connects the dots between the hard totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc which used fear as its primary force to make its citizens live with lies and the soft totalitarianism that has now arisen in our country that uses as its primary driving force its goal of making us live by lies, our aversion to suffering. It's our addiction to pleasure, it's our addiction to convenience that now attempts to force us to live with a different set of lies, but they're lies nonetheless. Once again to quote the author, he said this:

Today? The Western world has become post-Christian, with large numbers of those born after 1980 rejecting religious faith. This means that they will not

only oppose Christians when we stand up for our principles—in particular, in defense of the traditional family, of male and female gender roles, and of the sanctity of human life—but also they will not even understand why they should tolerate dissent based in religious belief.

I pointed out that there's an additional lie to those three and it's probably the most dangerous of all, and it's the lie that those lies themselves don't matter. I mean there are many today within the church who believe that those lies are not even worth pursuing, that they're all secondary matters, they're not really what the gospel is all about. We recognize that these particular lies are far more than simply the camel getting his nose inside the tent. These lies are now part of the litmus test to tell whether or not you are a good citizen in this culture. If you don't agree with this culture on their views of gender and sexuality and abortion, you're now going to pay a price, and it's extraordinarily naive to think that the enemy is going to stop just at those three lies. And so we're looking to a future that may well include a level of suffering that none of us is used to. And the question is are we all like Paul willing to -- quote -- *"suffer the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ."* And we recognize that Paul has a level of credibility that's far above

ours, I mean, he's writing this letter from a jail cell. We see him pursue Christ knowing that suffering is part of his equation and so we want to look this morning to see how he saw a way forward if suffering should become God's will for us.

This is what Paul said. He said: *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith -- that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Well in verse 10, Paul wants to know the power of Christ's resurrection, but notice what Paul says goes along with that power.

He speaks of the fellowship of Christ's suffering being conformed to his death. So the first thing that we see as we look at this paragraph is that Paul tells us that he's inviting us to die. Paul says you don't get resurrection power without first dying. It's an absolute prerequisite to the Christian life. But what exactly does being conformed to Christ's death mean?

Well, you know every one of us has within us a little voice, it's a voice that purports to represent us. It sprang into life at the very first when Adam ate that fruit. If you remember the story, Adam beforehand, you know, life was going on and he ate that fruit and what's the first thing he happened in his life? First thing he noticed, hey, I'm naked. Well, of course the first thing you ask yourselves is how could you not know you're naked? Well what happened is when he ate that fruit he fell. The first effect of him falling was that his own sense of who he was turned inward to himself. It gave birth to a little voice that tells you that you matter and you matter more than anyone else. It tells you that you're not getting respected enough, not cared for enough, it lets you know if you've been insulted or cheated or mistreated. Sometimes it happens to be correct, but many times it's not. And we call that our ego. You see it purports to be looking out for you but in the end if you listen to it, it will kill you. We have plenty of examples of people who let their egos get out of control

and we watched as it destroyed their lives. Saul, someone who took his own life is a classic example of someone who was literally killed by that little voice inside him. I mean if you remember Saul, he started out as this great warrior king who had slayed thousands of his enemies. David, however, was an even greater warrior. And there's an incident that took place and the scripture describes exactly what happened when someone listens to that little voice. Israel had just won a great victory and everyone is celebrating. It says in *1 Samuel*: *And the women sang to one another as they celebrated, "Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands."* And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, *"They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?"* You see in the midst of this giant celebration that little voice told Saul that David, who's nothing but a friend, nothing but an ally, was now instantly an enemy. And it was all because of ego. See, a terrible thing about ego is that it's incredibly fragile and it's easily threatened and it constantly demands to be fed and the feeding itself never satisfies the appetite, it only causes it to grow. And as it grows it's constantly feeling threatened and the threat only continues to grow. In Saul's case it convinced him that David was an imminent threat to his life and his kingdom, so much so that he made David into public enemy number one. This in spite of the fact that Saul

couldn't have had a more loyal and loving servant than David. Saul was a victim of his own ego. He fed it constantly, and it constantly grew until it wound up consuming him. Understand, ego is a problem that every one of us has. I mean unlike Saul we don't have the means or the power to find out how big our ego could get if we can endlessly feed it and that in the end turns out really to be a blessing. But you know Jesus had the solution to the problem of ego. He said to kill it. In fact he said you have to crucify it. *Luke 9 says: And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself -- and that's the little voice we're talking about -- let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."*

Now if Jesus had just stopped there, this would have been an extraordinarily difficult task, I mean, after all this is the little voice inside you that's telling you you're number one. I mean it's telling you you're the greatest thing since sliced bread and suddenly Jesus tells us it's our task to kill that voice? And well if that voice which seems to care about nothing else but me, if that voice is killed, then who's going to look out for my interests? Well, this is the very first thing that Jesus is telling us about about what faith is all about. I mean he promises us that there's wonderful blessings to be found if we're willing to

let that little voice die.

This is how Jesus puts it in *John 12*. He says: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."* Paul understood that exactly.

This is how he put it in *1 Corinthians 15*, he says: *You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.* So when Paul tells us that he counts all things as loss and as rubbish, he's directly flying in the face of that little voice within him who tells him you're holy, you're righteous, you're powerful, you're brilliant, you're everything else. Paul's describing how he puts his own ego to death. And the reason he's able to do that is because of what he knows that Christ has promised. Again, *verse 10: that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* You see Paul realized that, yes, the death of ego is incredibly painful but what comes out of that death and burial is a new life filled with a new resurrection power that mirrors and matches the power that raised Christ from the dead. Paul knows that counting all things in life as rubbish is what it takes to put that little voice to death so he, too, can experience

the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit. And so he wishes according to verse 11 that *by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead*. Paul describes how this happens in *Romans 6*. He says this: *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

You know what practically speaking resurrection power is? It's finally realizing that you no longer have to listen to that little voice inside you that pretends that it cares about you but in reality is going to wind up killing you. And the fear that drove you to listen to that voice before has now been replaced by a trust in God who promises that he will make everything right in the end and that every sacrifice that you make in putting to death that little voice will be met and matched many times over. Jesus promised, he said: *"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."* Well, just expand that idea of being given a power over that little voice and you can see how the church is able to function in the midst of persecution. And when you no longer feel the need to protect that little voice

inside you because you trust implicitly in the God who assured you that he will surround you and empower you in this life and reward you greatly in the next, you're going to find that you have an ability not to be cowed or frightened by adversity. Once you've died to yourself, dying for the kingdom becomes immensely easier.

So Paul says that the first means of learning how to enter into the sufferings of Christ is learning how to die. The second thing necessary that the church has to have if it's going to enter into a period of suffering is to learn how to live together in community. I don't want to sound unnecessarily alarmist but the point that Rod Dreher is making in his book *Live Not By Lies* is that the time to shore up and strengthen your church's sense of community of fellowship is not when hard times and persecution are a present day reality but right here right now when they're not yet here. This is what Dreher says:

The atomization of contemporary life has left most of us vulnerable to demoralization—and therefore, to manipulation. Christians are no different. It's easy for believers to feel that they are all alone, even when they are gathered at worship. By their indifference to solidarity, and surrendering to social disintegration as the new normal, Christians make it easier for those in

power who hate us to control us. We desperately need to throw off the chains of solitude and find the freedom that awaits us in fellowship. The testimony of anti-communist dissidents is clear: Only in solidarity with others can we find the spiritual and communal strength to resist. The longer we remain isolated in a period of liberty, the harder it will be to find one another in a time of persecution. We must see in our brothers and sisters not a burden of obligation but the blessing of our own freedom from loneliness, suspicion, and defeat. Finally, small-group fellowship keeps morale high when the contempt and torment of the world lashes hard the backs of believers. The young Christians in Moscow in the 1970s remember their time together, worshipping and praying and building one another up, as the happiest of their lives. They bent under the weight of the Soviet state, but they did not break, because God was with them—and so were their brothers and sisters in Christ. (Dreher, Rod. *Live Not by Lies* (p. 182). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)

So having learned how to die we next have to ask, well, how then shall we live? How does Christ's resurrection power get put to use? For that we need to learn how to define ourselves in the individual roles that God has for us in his church. One of the

things that Dreher points out over and over again is the absolute importance of knowing that you have people who have your back. That's exactly what church community is supposed to be. You see when you start having neighbors and family and social media relentlessly attacking you for being haters, for being bigots, it's incredibly important to know that there are people who support you, who love you and who are willing to sacrifice in order to keep, grow and edify the body of Christ. So Paul next goes into a discussion of how he personally addressed the giftedness that God had given him to support the body that he was in that was being persecuted. You see, our goal should be once having learned how to die ourselves, we now undertake the task of defining ourselves so we should understand how we should then live and that is understanding who we are in the body of Christ, and we do that by understanding that God has given us uniquely, each of us a gift. We want to understand what our gift is and how God intends us to use it to build up the body of Christ.

Paul goes on to say in our text this morning, he says: *That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* Well

those words might sound vaguely familiar if you remember a few messages back when Paul made the statement about working out, working out what God has worked in. This is what he said in *Philippians 2*. He said: *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* Paul's just reiterating the idea that we don't sit back passively and expect God to move us like some kind of puppet. Paul says we are to take the grace that God has worked into us and by our own efforts we work it out. Paul's simply putting it another way. He wants to lay hold of the grace that Christ has already given him when Christ made him his own. And Paul has very specific memories of how exactly that took place. When Paul was struck by the Spirit on the road to Damascus, Christ gave him very specific instructions as to what Christ intended to do with Paul's life. This is what Jesus said, he said: *'But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles -- to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'*

So Paul was told directly by Christ that he, Paul, was going to turn his people from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to the power of God. But you know he didn't wait around for God to clear a pathway ahead of him. Paul set about the task of working out those instructions rather than waiting for God to use him, like I said, like some kind of puppet. I mean Paul knew he'd been gifted of God and that his task was to work out the gifts that God had worked into him, but here's the deal. Paul's not alone in this. I mean understand God's instruction to Paul is not at all unique to Paul. See, God has the same goal for every single one of his sheep. All of us have the task of turning eyes from darkness to light and lies from the power of Satan to the power of God. And understand that is not something that the enemy is going to let go unchallenged. Anyone with eyes and ears can certainly see that Satan has stepped up his game of late. The early church had one huge incentive to grow individual members in the ability to love and support one another and that was the hostility that was evident in the non church community. That's just what we're seeing today.

I've spoken often about the importance of community but it takes on a whole new level of importance when you know that the culture outside those doors is growing increasingly hostile. God has uniquely gifted the body of Christ to be a support mechanism for times such as these. God says that every single member of the body

of Christ is gifted by the Holy Spirit to contribute uniquely to the health and growth of the body. How we do that individually is really up to the Holy Spirit, but the fact is each one of us is called to do that, and it's clear in scripture. *1 Peter 4:10* says: *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.* Peter's making it clear that giftedness is not something for a select few. It's something that everybody in the body of Christ is given, that every single individual called as one of Christ's sheep is uniquely given a gift in order to edify and build up Christ's church. *1 Corinthians 12* says: *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.*

So God's quite clear there's a variety of gifts that he gives to the church through individual members of the church. Everyone has a uniquely bestowed gift and a call from God to use that gift. *Romans 12* says this: *For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.* *Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who*

exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. See, just as Paul was determined to work out the gifts that God had worked in him, so too are we called to the very same process with the gifts that God has given to us.

Let me give you an example. She's not here so I can use her as an example. Elvia, I just want to mention. Elvia is someone who is determined to find out just what her gift is and like Paul, pressed hard to lay hold of what Christ has laid hold of in her. See, Elvia believes that her gift of service is to be a missionary, and she is relentlessly pursuing it, understanding that God is going to point her in the direction that he wants her to go. You know the old cliché, you can't move a ship unless it's moving -- you can't steer a ship unless it's moving. Elvia trusts God and she is moving in a specific direction. That's exactly what Paul did when he sought to bring the gospel to Asia. Paul didn't sit around to say, okay, God, move me when you want. He wasn't a puppet. He took the initiative based on the information that he had plus the wisdom that God had given him and so he decided I need to go to Asia, and on his way to Asia he got stopped by God himself. And the scripture doesn't give the specifics but this is what it says in *Acts 16*. It says: *And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the*

word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. So here's the situation, you know, Paul says, "God, we are headed to Asia." God says, "Paul, no, you're not." Paul says, "Okay, God, we are headed to Bithynia." God says, "No, you're not." Paul says, "Okay. What next?" He gets a vision. The vision tells him that Macedonia is the direction that he needs to go in. The point is God never castigates Paul for heading in the wrong direction. He simply redirects him. And so it is with the gifts that God gives us. We pursue what wisdom tells us is the right gift and God usually through the body of Christ affirms the direction or he corrects it, he redirects it. Now, Elvia's desire is to go to Honduras and be a missionary. That's the direction she's headed in until God says otherwise. And that's exactly how all of us need to pursue the gift that God has given to us. I mean I'm up here preaching to you because the very first body that I was ever in was a body that told me we believe you have the gift to preach. And trust me, it was the very last gift that I was interested in. In fact I told God I will do anything, anything as

long as it's not public speaking. And God says it's public speaking. I mean, the gifts are given for the body of Christ and so it's the body of Christ that will usually affirm where your giftedness lies.

Paul goes on to say: *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.* What Paul was saying here is there's no such thing in the Christian life as having said, "well, I guess I've arrived." In fact if you're a believer in Christ there's no point in your life where you will ever say "I've arrived" because everything is a continuum pointing towards the perfection of Christ. As my old friend used to say, the closer you get to the ultimate light, the more that light illuminates in you things that are not pretty. And the things that I now see in my life as ugly and in need of upgrade and fixing by God's Holy Spirit were not things that even began to enter into my conscience as a brand new believer. Like I've said before, new believers are oftentimes fixed on un obvious sins, sins that I called sex, drugs and rock-n-roll type sins. That's not to minimize the sin, these are certainly things that you have to deal with but they're obvious, they're blatant, they're obviously out there. And once God convicts and empowers to you defeat those sins -- the subtle sins -- the ones that the enemy carefully knows how to bury, the ones that he actually tries to make look sometimes like virtues, you know, where coveting becomes consuming and envy

and jealousy become critiquing and gossip becomes sharing, those are the ones that God is continually working on me now. And as we grow, we find new ones that are always replacing the older ones because that's how it works. You are continually on your upward call and you will never, ever get there because there is perfection. Paul recognizes that he has not and will not ever arrive but here's how he continues. In verse 13 he says:

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. See, Paul has learned first how to die to himself by trusting that in the end God will make all the injustices and all the slights and all the ego attacks right and blessed and that by humbling himself now he will be exalted later by Christ himself. He knows he is to pursue the resurrection power of Christ, seeking out the gifts that God has given him uniquely and now he's showing us how he deals with his past, his present and his future in Christ because that's how we go about living for Christ. See, we too have to die to ourselves and we too have to pursue with Christ's resurrection power the gifts he's given to us to build up the body of Christ. And we too have to figure out how to reconcile our past with our present and our future. And so we do what Paul did. And you know what Paul did? He went to the cross. He went to the cross with his past. I mean

Paul had so many things behind him at this point, things that were absolutely awful, including the murder of other Christians, but there were also things that Paul had done that there were miraculous and spectacular things that advanced the kingdom of God immensely. Paul had the task of dealing with them both. Paul had to deny himself the ability from the past to fill him with guilt and to rob him of energy and joy and power and we too have to do the very same thing. The enemy loves to bring up our past sins in order to do the very same thing in our lives as he tried to do with Paul. But Paul literally had the perfect solution. He brought all of his past to the foot of the cross, recognizing that God himself loved him enough to take all of Paul's sin and make those sins his own on the cross. This is how Paul put it in *Galatians 2*. He said: *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.*

Paul also went to the cross with his present. See, Paul denied himself the ability to sit back on his laurels, whatever they might be, and they were considerable. This is *2 Corinthians 11*, Paul describing his resume as it were. He says: *Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings,*

*and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. So Paul takes his whole life and he brings it to the foot of the cross. And there the very idea that the King of the universe, the one whom all glory and honor belong, would be stripped naked and hang nailed on a cross in order to pay the price of his sins, that put everything into its proper perspective. That's why Paul says: *For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.* Because at the foot of the cross even Paul's resume shrinks into nothingness.*

Paul also went to the cross with his future. See, Paul understood that if God cared enough to die for his past and his present, then how could he not care for his future? In *Romans 8:31* he says: *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up*

for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? And because he knew that Christ had proved his love on the cross, he could say with complete confidence: And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. That's how Paul did it.

I started this message speaking about the need for the church to prepare for suffering. And there's no question, we all know that things are growing far more hostile outside those doors. But it's also a time for rejoicing. It's time for the church to be purified and sanctified and oftentimes that comes through struggle. There's going to come a time in the near future when simply naming the name of Christ is going to become very costly. It will have the effect of separating those unwilling to pay the price from those who are willing. But that's a good thing. What we want from these times is to shape and refine us so that we can be strong and joyful, glorifying God no matter what the circumstance. And regardless the culture, Paul's way of strengthening the church by dying to self, by discerning his gifts, the gifts that God has given to us for the sake of the body and then by laying our past, our present, and our future at the foot of the cross, well that can only serve to make us and the body of Christ stronger, and that's a very good thing. Let's pray.

Father, we just acknowledge that the world outside is growing progressively more and more hostile but there's a blessing to be had in all of this, Lord. Believing in Jesus Christ is no longer just an extra-curricular activity, it either defines your life or it doesn't. And as the days go forward we're going to see that become more and more obvious. So I pray for every single member of our church, Lord, that you would speak to them, just give us the courage and the strength and the wisdom to understand the nature of the times that we are in and to rely on you to seek out for each and every one of us to seek out the gift that God has given to us because the body is going to become incredibly important, because fellowship and solidarity and having each other's backs is going to become what gets us through any suffering that comes our way. And finally, Lord, give us the ability to take each and every thing that we've got, good, bad and ugly and lay it at the foot of the cross because that's where everything assumes its proper perspective. That's where we recognize and give all glory to You. And we praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.