



## **The Ups & Downs of the Christian Life – Part 2**

### **The Pains of Testing**

**Pastor Mike Fabarez**

Well, let's just imagine that I got some inside information. Don't ask me how I got it, but I have some inside information about a notorious thief and murderer who has gotten out of prison and he is going to be prowling around in your neighborhood tonight. So I have some instructions to offer you. First of all, if you have any security cameras or a Ring doorbell, you need to go and take those down, dismantle them. You need to open all your curtains and blinds. You need to leave all your windows cracked open just a few inches. You need to unlock all your doors. If you have an attached garage, be sure to leave that up all the way. And while you're at it if you have any outside lights, like a porch light or a security light, be sure to turn all those off and keep them off tonight. How do you like my advice, pretty good? No, that's not good advice. That's bad advice, Pastor Mike. That's dumb. That's what the Bible calls stupid some twelve times, by the way. I get in trouble for using that word, but I got to tell you it's a biblical word, "stupid."

No, no one who really perceives a threat like that, a notorious thief and murderer, would ever take that kind of advice. That would be stupid. No one would do that. That's silly. And yet, something very much like that is going on and has gone on in the Church because we do have an adversary that is prowling around. It's the same one that was prowling around in Corinth 2,000 years ago. And sadly, they weren't as vigilant as they should have been about barring the windows and locking the doors. They, like us, unfortunately didn't even see what it means and what it would be to lock a door or keep a garage door bolted shut. They didn't see that as clearly as we all should see it. Families, unfortunately, leave their spiritual windows open, and individual lives unfortunately aren't very vigilant about keeping their lives protected from the enemy.

Now, there's a passage in Second Corinthians Chapter 2 that we're going to reach today. It'll be the verse that we end on, verse 11, that talks about our enemy, and it infers that we ought to be wise to his strategies. And it's important to catch the context of this because really the verse that we are going to start with today, in verse 9, gives us the key to what it means to start putting the locks up and the security, you know, lights on and, you know, the security cameras making sure those are all working. There is a way to do that, it comes down to very small choices and they're all summarized with one little four-letter word here in verse 9, I want you to look at it with me, Second Corinthians Chapter 2 starting in verse 9. We'll look at only three verses, that's all really we can process on this very important text. We must get it, we must understand this. If we can understand this and start to put this into practice you're going to be a whole lot better off because we do have an enemy that prowls around like a beast, like a lion that's seeking to devour your life, mine, this church, your family, your sub-congregation, your small group.

So here's what he says, verse 9, Second Corinthians Chapter 2 verses 9 through 11. "For this is why," I'm reading from the English Standard Version, "This is why I wrote, that I might test you." There's the little four-letter word "test," T-E-S-T, to "test you and know whether or not



you are obedient in everything." OK. That in light of the context, as you look up above, verse 5, if you have an English Standard Version, probably any translation is going to start the paragraph there, it's about this forgiveness of the person that last time we were studying together in this text. We talked a lot about that theme and about the importance of all this, so it spills back into the previous chapter, but the idea of the problem that was confronting the Corinthians and how they were supposed to respond to it. Now he'd written a previous letter, we learned, which may or may not be First Corinthians, most people think it is not. He'd even made a painful visit, he calls it there, at the beginning of this chapter, and so he's told them to do something about the circumstance that they're in. Now that's super helpful for us to start to define what this test is all about.

They have a circumstance and there are two ways they can handle it. The Apostle Paul speaks with the authority of Christ as an apostle and says you should do this. So he wrote them so they should do something that he knows is the right thing to do that would please God. Here is the pleasing decision to make. And he says I wrote you about that, why? Because it is in essence, really, when I tell you what God says, whether it is a verse from Scripture or whether it's a good biblical sermon or whether it's a good Christian book you're reading or whether just the conviction of the Holy Spirit, the prompting of God's Spirit in your life, your conscience even. If it's something that you know in the circumstance that you're in that is saying, here's the right path to take, that is the test. Now what step are you going to take in response to that? Here's a circumstance. Here's the light that is shown on the right path. And we are faced with those all the time. And that is the difference between locking your front door or keeping it cracked open. Because it ends in verse 11, "that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we're not ignorant of his designs," or his schemes or his strategies. And it all comes down to whether they're going to pass the test.

Now, the test for them is in verse 10. It reminds us of the test because he's already talked about it. "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive." Now, why would he say that? Because he said, you guys need to forgive him and then he's really pushing even further, you need to REALLY forgive him, stop withholding this against him. Matter of fact, look at verse 8, reaffirm your love for him, "I beg you, reaffirm your love for him." So why would he have to say, whoever you've forgiven, I've forgiven? Because apparently, some people were using Paul as an excuse for not jumping on the forgiveness bandwagon for this guy. The guy is repented. We dealt with this last week. It's implied in this text. And they all need to reaffirm him. Reaffirm. Put your arm around him. Love this guy, and Paul just wants to make sure that he's not being used as an excuse. "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I've forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ." I love that. It's like Christ is clearly forgiving this guy. We're just affirming that. I'm saying I forgive this guy, and really for your sake I'm telling you, yes, of course I forgive him. And you should forgive him, so much so that you reaffirm your love for him.

And then this statement in verse 11, "So that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we're not ignorant of his designs." I'd like this sermon to go past the main theme of this text because the tests of our obedience for you may not right now be forgiveness that you need to forgive. Some of us it might be, we'll deal with that, but I'm going to think more broadly just by



starting in verse 9. "This is why I wrote that I might test you and know whether you're obedient in everything." To start with we need to know what a test of obedience is. Number one, let's recognize. Let's discern. Let's be able to figure it out. Is this a test of obedience? Number one, "Recognize the Tests of Obedience." That is where we start. And if you don't know you're having the test you may easily fail the test, then you don't even know you were having the test. So let's make sure this week, and maybe even this afternoon and this evening, you see when you are faced with a test of obedience. Because our Christian lives are going to be full of them and we need to make sure that we are faithful to, number one, recognize what it is. And then, of course, we would like to do what it is that God would want us to do. That is found, obviously, within the text of Scripture. And Paul is writing Scripture here as an apostle, as a representative of Christ and it comes with the full authority of heaven. We need to forgive this guy. He repented, forgive.

And we already know that by reading the gospels. Jesus says if a man repents, even if it's seven times a day, forgive him. And so he's saying, I know you're faced with this, what to do with your feelings toward this guy who's repented, but I'm telling you, forgive him. Forgive him all the way, reaffirm your love for him. But it's a test of obedience. Now, why would it ever be a test, right? Why is a test hard? I mean just by the nature of the word "test," we think about, that's difficult, back in school, it's strains memory to be tested on something. You got to think, do I even know what to do here? Here's the thing about a test and why it's hard. Turn with me to Galatians Chapter 5, and I just want to paint the picture of the basic test of the Christian life that all of us are going to have in varying ways throughout your day, today, tomorrow, the next day, next week, next month, you're going to be having tests of obedience. And the goal, I hope, is for you to be obedient in everything. Now, we all stumble in many ways. But let's make sure our batting average is reflecting our faith. And our faith in Christ should begin with us coming to him and saying, I trust you, I'm ready to follow you as Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Now that's the part we got to figure out. What does that mean, deny yourself, take up your cross? Well let's look at this passage in Galatians Chapter 5 and I think it will help us a great deal. Now if you know Galatian Chapter 5, I'm assuming you know this from very famous verses here in verses 19 through 23. We have two opposing lists of things that are going to spring from the desires of the flesh and things that are going to spring from the desire and will of the Spirit. But it begins in verse 17 by showing the opposition of those two, and that's why a test feels like a test when it comes to a test of obedience. Here's why it's hard. Verse 17, "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." Now let's just think that through. You're a Christian. You have an opportunity. You might be paying your taxes this week if you're a procrastinator, and you've got some decisions to make. You know what the Bible says about paying taxes, you know what the Bible says about honesty, you know what the Bible says about the truth. And you know those, whether it's through the prompting of the Spirit, reading your Bible in the morning, or whether it is just you and your conscience going, I know what I should do here.



But it's going to be a test because the test of your honesty in that case is going to be fueled in one direction by what the Spirit wants and fueled in the other direction with something that is all about who you are. You're not just spirit, you're also flesh. You're encased in flesh. You are intermingled with your flesh. You are not only a spiritual being who now has been reborn, the Bible says you have a new heart, but you also have the Holy Spirit who has somehow jammed himself into your life. The preposition is he's now "in you," as it says at the bottom of Second Corinthians Chapter 1, and he is your guarantee of this inheritance. So he's there continually reminding you of what he wrote, continually reminding what he wrote, not only on the pages of Scripture, but in your conscience, and he's wanting you to do the right thing. So here's path "A." This is God's will. This is that great Psalm 119 picture of the pathway of righteousness all given to us in his Word. Honesty, paying taxes, just to use my first illustration. But my flesh says, I don't want to do that. And my flesh says, I do not want to do that, and it's always in opposition to what the Spirit wants. That's just the way it works. He gives a ton of examples in verses 18 through 21 about what the flesh wants to do. And then in verses 22 and 23, here's what the Spirit wants to do and these are going to be in opposition so you can't just do what you want.

Now non-Christian lives ultimately come down to doing what you want, living for ourselves. Second Corinthians Chapter 5 verse 15 says we're not supposed to any longer live for ourselves, but as Christians we're supposed to live for the one who died for us and rose again. That's what it means now to "take up my cross" Take up my cross, what does that mean? Take up my cross. What is a cross? A cross is a place where the government of Rome used to kill criminals. Well, it's about denying yourself. And here's what it's going to feel like. Like you're going to have to kill this part of yourself. Well, that sounds hard. "Deny yourself and take up your cross." And then you can follow the Good Shepherd down the path. Because he's going be saying to you, come this way, this way, this way. Honesty, truth, do what you're supposed to do. And my flesh is going to go, I don't want to, I don't want to, I don't want to. So I've got to say with all the "I don't want to's," I've got to say something harsh toward the fleshly desires.

Now the inclusio here, the buns on the sandwich here of this particular text, go down to verse 24. Did you like my definition of inclusio? Verse 24, "And those who belong to Christ," now notice this in the perfect tense, "have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." If you want to know what it means to unpack the words of Christ, "if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross," it's found right here. That the minute you put your trust in Christ, you're making a decision, I'm not going to live for myself anymore. I'm now saying I'm going to deny my built-in desires and passions as it's put here. I've crucified them. I've taken up my cross. I've said I need to die to my own desires if ever they're in conflict with the Spirit. And of course, the Bible says they always will be. As Peter said, "the desires of the flesh wage war against your soul." So the internal part of you is going to, if you're a Christian, want to do what the Spirit of God wants you to do, but it's always going to be in conflict with the flesh. That makes it a test. Whether it's a small test, a medium test, or a big test, it's always a conflict.



Now whenever you feel that conflict and you should be attuned to that conflict, you ought to recognize that conflict, you ought to say I know the conflict is coming. It's coming today, it's coming tomorrow, it's coming all for the rest of my life until my flesh is finally redeemed. And Romans 8 says, it will be one day when we get a glorified body. And no longer will the impulses of my flesh be selfishness and all the things that are listed here, immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry. None of that will any longer be embedded in the firmware of my flesh. Look forward to that day. But right now, I know every test of obedience is going to be there with feelings that make me want to say no to the path of righteousness and yes to the path of selfishness, whatever that might be.

That's what a test feels like. Here's the breadth and the depth of testing. Let's talk about the baseline, let's talk about the benchmark. Matthew 22, Jesus asked about the greatest commandment and he made it very clear. He quoted Deuteronomy Chapter 6 verse 5. And he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." So something about who I am has got to show my devotion to God because I love him first. I'm supposed to love God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind. So that is the baseline, that's the benchmark. And then everything else that I'm loyal to, everything else that I'm drawn to, everything else as Isaac Watts put in his great hymn, all the things that charm me most need to be subservient to the loyalty and love of God. And God and the Good Shepherd are saying, follow me, follow me, follow me. The Spirit within me saying, follow him, follow him, follow him. My new spirit is saying, I want to follow him, I want to follow him and my flesh is saying no you don't, no you don't, no you don't.

If you feel that conflict, let's just talk to new Christians for a minute. If you're new to all this and you're a new Christian and you think, well, I just got to get a little stronger in the Christian life and I won't have this battle anymore. Here's my response to that. That's not how it works, that's not how it works. You're going to fight the battle for the rest of your Christian life. So get ready to fight the battle. When Paul was about to die, he finally said, "I fought the good fight," because he fought it all the way to the end. So you and I need to be ready for this fight and we need to know that always there will be something within me wanting to fight my ultimate love for God. Like love for what? Well, all kinds of things. I often think about Matthew Chapter 19 and you may distance yourself from the example of the rich young ruler, but you really shouldn't. Because all of us at some level have a basic fleshly desire for money, not because we love to bathe in bathtubs full of cash, but because we like what it does for us. We like what it will provide for us. We would much rather have nicer things than not nice things. We'd rather have stuff than do without stuff, and money is very helpful in that regard.

Now Jesus meets the rich young ruler in Matthew Chapter 19 and he says, what do I got to do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus, what does the law say? He quotes the law and he says, well do that and you'll be fine. And of course, all that is just a mechanism to get him to see that he's a sinner and needs the grace of Christ, but he doesn't see it. He says, "Oh, I've done all these things from my youth." And he says fine then, let's just get to the heart of the matter. One thing you lack, what you got to do is sell everything you have, right? Give it to the poor and follow me. And he's looking at the ragtag bunch over Jesus' shoulder, fishermen who didn't really have a very successful business to start with, let's just say, the zealot, he didn't





even have a party to work with in the government, the tax collectors who everybody hates anyway, and the rich young ruler is saying, ah... I don't want to do that. I don't want to be associated with those guys and I don't want to lose all my money. As a matter of fact, I know that because the next verse says, this man who had all this stuff, this rich young attorney with all the gel in his hair, with his nice robe on, he says, what does he say? He goes away sad, and here's what the divine commentary is, because he owned much wealth. He had a lot of wealth, had a little money. Then Jesus turns to the disciples and he says, you know what, hey, disciples, look how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Now, again, if you think that's varsity Christianity because you grew up in a church where the pastor didn't believe what the Bible says, maybe he's taught you that that's like what he really meant it was really hard for people to be varsity Christians. Or, you know, it's really hard for them to join our apostolic gang. But no, he didn't say that, he says it's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Why? Because Ecclesiastes 5 says if you love wealth, you'll never be satisfied with wealth. So the rich should never love their wealth. That's the whole point of First Timothy 6. Don't love your wealth. The love of money is the root of all sorts of evil. And plenty of people have ditched their spiritual life because of their love of money. So money charms me. That's a great thing, right? You write me a check for \$10,000, it's not going to make my day worse, it's going to my day better, at least immediately. I'll be very happy with you giving me, not the church, giving me \$10,000. That'd be great. But here's the deal. If I love that and I'm not willing to give that up then I really haven't responded to Christ's baseline call, which is, "if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." What is the cross all about? It's crucifying my flesh with its passions and desires. So I've got to be willing to say my love for God is superior to my love for cash or money or comfort or convenience or anything else money can buy.

Now, there are certain things you might think about in the crossroads. The crossroads might be for you, you might think, well, I'm thinking about righteous path and then sinful path, and I wouldn't want to even mention to you, Pastor Mike, what the temptation is. Well, those are easy things for you, I mean, you should at least at the core level of your heart to have no problem, at least with knowing what the right path is, right? If your temptation is to run off to Las Vegas and live just an absolutely debauched weekend, spend a lot of money on, you know, the card tables and hang out with prostitutes, you do more than hang out, but you do have your weekend of partying in Vegas. I hope you'd know if you sit here at church you're thinking I know the right thing to do. Well if you know the right thing to do and you don't do it to him it is sin, to quote James 4, and of course that would be sin. But it's easy to say well I know that's wrong and everyone in your small group knows that's wrong.

Do you know what the harder things are? They go back to, let's just talk about the father of faith, as he's often put, he's put that way in Romans Chapter 4, Abraham. Let me quote Genesis 22. "Take your son," Abraham, "your only son, the son whom you love, and go sacrifice him," on the mountain that I'm going to show you. I know there's a lot in the Bible about loving our family members. So Jesus wouldn't tell me really to ever do anything that would in any way impinge on my love for my family. You want to talk about the kind of thing that is very hard for people in this auditorium right now to detect as a crossroads and a test of



your obedience, it's whether or not you choose a path of righteousness over and against something that may in some way impinge upon your family member and Jesus made that clear in the gospels. I know it's never on any of the DaySpring cards but the reality is he said I didn't come to bring peace in this world, do you think I came to bring peace in this world, I didn't come to bring peace in this world. I came to divide a family up, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, a parent against his child, a sister against her brother. I came to mess all that up. Really? Is that what you came to do? No, but that is the byproduct of it. It is. And then he says hey if anyone loves father or mother more than me, they're not worthy of me. If anybody loves a child, daughter or son, more than me then you're not worthy of me.

Now are we not supposed to love our family? Of course you should love your family, you should sacrifice for your children. But the point is the baseline, Matthew 22, Deuteronomy 6:5, is you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. And if ever at a crossroads between whether it's a weekend in Vegas being a pagan, or loving your kids or your wife or your family more than you love God, it's the same test of obedience. And they're all going to be hard. I mean, think about it. Think of all the tests in the Scripture, not just the rich attorney. Think about Israel's love for a king. Did you read the Daily Bible Reading this week? Smile at me if you read Daily Bible Reading this week. Here are the people coming to Samuel saying we want a king. And you know why they wanted a king? Do you remember what it said in the Daily Bible Reading this week in First Samuel? We want to be like all the other nations. We don't want to be oddballs. I mean we're the only theocracy around without a king. We need a king. And Samuel it says was displeased and he went to God he said, God what do I do? And God said, "Stop." He said they're not rejecting you they're rejecting me.

So what did God think about this? He thought it was bad. I got a theocracy, I want to continue this theocracy. We can do this with Levites and priests. We don't need a monarchy. We don't need a king. Do you know what it's going to cost you guys to have a king and a standing army? This is going to be rough. I'll protect you. I'll be your king. No, no, we want a king, we want to be like everyone else. And for that love of fitting in they rejected God's path of righteousness. God gave them someone. And by the way, that's how Satan is, by the way, his pockets are deep. What is the thing that charms you most? He will give you that. I mean, think about it. I know it says in the text, God did it, but this was their fleshly request. And so God pulls out a guy who's head and shoulders taller than all the rest. Remember that? Attractive from head to toe. Here comes Saul. Great king. This is the kind of king we want to, oh, thank you, God, thank you. God gave them what was not good for them because they said they wanted to fit in. Sometimes fitting in will be the thing that takes you down this path of compromise, even though God is testing your faith here to say choose me, please.

It can be as simple as food. Do you remember in Numbers Chapter 11, the Israelites were complaining that they wanted the food that they used to eat in Egypt? We want to go back and their complaint was, we want to eat like we ate there. God had said, come and follow me, follow the Good Shepherd here in a pillar of fire, follow him into the Promised Land, and they said, well, we really like that food better. For food you're going to give up the path of righteousness. That's exactly what they wanted to do. Solomon gave up the path of righteousness by building a harem. Now, I don't think anybody's tempted in this auditorium to



create a harem. "My wife won't let me create a harem." I understand that. That's not your direct temptation to build your harem. But you know the base of all that. And you can identify that quickly with a lot of things that will take you down a path of unrighteousness. The Pharisees, John 12 verses 42 and 43, it says "you loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." Think about that. We know what that's all about. Jesus unpacked that in his castigation of the Pharisee in Matthew 23. And here he said, all you guys, all you want are respectful greetings in the marketplace. You want the best seat at all the banquets. You want everyone to say, Rabbi, Rabbi. You want all this reputation but you could sacrifice that and follow the King of kings and Lord of lords who's here in the humble state of a traveling itinerant rabbi. Follow him. And they knew the Scriptures. They KNEW the Scriptures and they weren't willing to recognize Christ. Why? Because they cashed in the path of obedience for a fleshly desire for a good reputation and they killed him out of envy.

Lot's wife. We don't know a lot about what was going on there. But Jesus told you to remember Lot's wife. And Lot's wife, you want to talk about something? Here she looks back, we assume, longingly or she'd never have been punished for this. She looks back longingly at her home and her hometown. You know, there are people who cash in the path of righteousness because they love their zip code. They love their neighbor. They love their home. They love where they live. That's happening in our church right now. And if the shoe fits, you've got to put the shoe on because the path of righteousness is cashed in for food, it's cashed for sex, it cashed in for living in the neighborhood that you like. That's happening all the time. Jesus said it so often. Matthew Chapter 9 verses 57 through 62, people were saying that all the time, I want to go home, I want to go home. Let me go home. I'll follow you but I got to go home first. Don't fall in love with your zip code.

Demas loved the present world. Now, Second Timothy Chapter 4 talks about Demas loving the present world. What was that? I just wonder from where he was now traveling through all these places in Asia Minor. You were coming in a direction of increasing paganism and a lot of options. I mean, it's like New York, Chicago, LA. Here was a guy who fell in love with the world. What does that mean? Who knows? Recreation, entertainment, I don't know what it was. But it was kind of an I want the culture. I like this. This charms me. Well, everything that charms you most, you need to make sure it is subservient to the love and loyalty that you have to follow the Good Shepherd. And every test of obedience is going to be laid before you and you just need to know when you're having one. And all you need is a circumstance and the Word of God, which can come either as the echo of your conscience, of the impression and the conviction of the Spirit, it can be through a sermon, a good Christian book, the counsel of a good Christian friend. You know the right thing to do. If you don't do the right thing it's sin. And you got to know your flesh is always, it's a magnet just attracting you to the wrong path. You got to fight this battle. Recognize the test of obedience. Know how broad and how deep this is.

And by the way, just jot this down as though I had time for this. James Chapter 2 verses 14 through 26. If I were to ask you, are we justified by faith alone what would this congregation say? Oh, trick question. You saw that one coming. I hope you all believe in justification by faith alone. How do I get right with God? I am justified, declared righteous, imputed with





Christ's righteousness by faith alone. That's what the whole fourth chapter of Romans is about. Abraham was justified by faith alone. That's the whole point until you get to Romans Chapter 2. In verse 22, [James 2:24] in particular, it says, so we see, after talking about Abraham sacrificing his son on Mount Moriah, he says, "So we see that a man is not justified by faith alone." What in the world? Roman Catholics love that verse. That's a good one. Justified by works through the sacramental system. That's not what this is about. How in the world does Paul say that we're justified by faith only that Abraham believed God and was counted to him, "Logizomai," imputed to him as righteousness? And now we see in James as he's trying to tell people you can't just sit there and say you're a Christian and you have faith if there are no works that spring from that.

See, you're justified by works. How does that work? Let me put it this way. Justification by faith is justified by works. Is that a good way to put it? Justification by faith is justified by works. You get to look in the mirror and say I see my faith at work. And if my faith doesn't spring forth works, well, then there's a problem with my faith. Luther would say the root of our salvation is not works. We're not saved by works. But the fruit of our salvation has to be works or it's not real salvation. The justification of you passing the test of righteousness, of obedience, is going to make you feel like I'm really a Christian. It's going to test your faith to see if it's real and you'll be able to say, I see that it's real because I'm seeing me passing more and more of these tests. And you know what else? The world will start to see you're different. You don't live by the rules of this world. You don't live by the rules of family magazine, OC family magazine. You don't live by the rules of your corporate, climb the corporate ladder ethic at work. You don't live by any of that. You live by following the Good Shepherd and every test of obedience, you recognize it and you willfully, purposefully say, my flesh has to take a back seat to doing what God wants me to do.

We understand the test of faith, the thing that helps to justify our justification by faith alone. Then we can look at verse 10 in our passage and see the hard one they were dealing with. What was on the table for them? Well, you're supposed to forgive, right? This guy's repented, so you know what? All that you guys did in response, verse 6, it's all been dealt with. Verse 7, you should forgive and comfort, lest he be "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." You care about how he feels right now. "I beg you" verse 8, "reaffirm your love for him." Now, "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive." Don't use me as an excuse, I forgive him too. "Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I've forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ." It's for your good, it's in line with Christ. If someone repents, forgive him. That's hard. You know, if your crossroads is to go spend a weekend partying and you know, well, that's not right. That's debauchery, that's sin, you shouldn't do that. That should be, at least in your brain, a lot easier for you to say, well I'm going to deny my flesh and take the right path here.

But here's the problem with forgiveness. It is a particularly hard test and I'd like you to work to pass it. Number two, "Pass the Difficult Test of Forgiveness." So let's go back into the topic of the context and talk about forgiveness. Let me tell you why it's so hard. Why is this one of the hardest tests you may be facing? I preach this now, this sermon throughout the weekend and this is the thing that's resonating the most, I think, because we're getting back to something that is very hard to do. And you can think in your past of a lot of people who have wronged



you, who have sinned. Maybe it's been a second-person kind of sin, and they've sinned and they besmirched Christ or whatever and you're just indignant about that, or they have sinned personally against you. Nevertheless, it is hard for you to forgive. And I'm going to tell you why it's hard. Number one, understand the test of forgiving. Here's why it's hard. Because the thing that you're going to have to deny is a godly desire. What? The thing you're going to have to deny is a Godly desire, it's really clear. Passages like Psalm 58 verse 10, "The righteous will rejoice when he sees vengeance," THE vengeance. Okay, this is the same reason you can eat popcorn and watch the bad guy get it at the end of the movie and you feel like this was a decent 90 minutes. I feel good. And you get up with a spring in your step. That's a good movie.

Why is it so good? Because the bad guy got it in the end. And it's usually now some waify 90-pound girl taking on a bunch of steroid-ridden men. Nevertheless, the bad guy loses. And we all feel good about justice. That's a biblical virtue. That's a biblical virtue, the Lake of Fire is all about vengeance. The book of Revelation is all about vengeance, half of the prophets in the Old Testament were all about vengeance. It's a godly thing. The bad guy should lose. And the good guy should be vindicated. Now, here's the thing. When someone sins against you, they're in the bad-guy category and my virtue says there should be some payback. But here's the thing. In the Scripture, there are only two organizations that God has granted the ability to do some kind of response, some kind of response to the sinner. Number one, the Church, only passively, they can dole out some kind of shame upon the person by kicking them out and excising them from the community of the redeemed. So that's true. The church can discipline people. That's not your job, that's the Church's job, and you can report them to the Church. That's absolutely appropriate.

You can also report them to the civil authorities. The Bible says in Romans 13, that they bear the sword and are able to implement exactly what the Old Testament says the government should do, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life. The reason Jesus quotes that and says, I know you've heard it said, but you ought to, is because he's talking to individuals living in a government. The government has been tasked with eye for eye and tooth for tooth. It is the individual who has been called to forgive. And we ought to forgive, particularly when there is repentance. And I say that because there's a kind of forgiveness we talked about in our last message that, yes, we grant, even without repentance. But then there's this real kind of reconciliation where I can reaffirm my love for the person. I can make sure that we're part of the same team. My arm is around you when there is repentance, even if it's seven times a day or 70 times seven. But I've got to say no to a good desire. There are a lot of bad desires. I say, well, of course, I'm ashamed to even say it out loud. But this desire, it's a godly desire. But I got to say it's not my task. That's why the Bible says, vengeance is wrong, says the Lord. Is that what he says? No. Romans 12, "Vengeance is mine ... says the Lord." It's not for you, don't take your own vengeance.

Even Jesus on a cross, think about this, going to the cross, he has this thought. I mean, when the whole thing was, oh, we got to stand up and cut off some ears here. He says, couldn't I call 10,000 angels to come down and deal with this? That's called justice, vengeance. But instead, he gets upon a cross being nailed there, spit upon, mocked, hung up in shame in



nakedness before all kinds of people outside the passageway of Israel, of Jerusalem, outside the city gate. And he looks at them and says, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they do." What? Individual forgiveness is hard to do because we're going to have to deny this desire for justice. This is the hard part. This is where garage doors go down about halfway or two-thirds of the way down. And the test is in the context. The test is, can you, look at verse 8 again, "I beg you to reaffirm your love for him." The sinner? Reaffirm your love for him. There are people in this room right now who think they're godly. They think the garage door is shut. They think Satan is in no way going to exploit their decision because they're telling people, I forgive him, I forgive him, I forgive her, I forgive her. But they can't bring themselves to reaffirm their love for the person. And do you understand the difference? There's something about wholehearted forgiveness that allows you now to stretch out your arms and forgive someone completely and to reaffirm your love. That's a good little litmus test. If you can't reaffirm your love for someone you have not forgiven them.

Understand this test, it's very hard for us, but don't settle for a cheap substitute. Let me give you three things real quick that'll happen if you've settled for a partial substitute for forgiveness. Number one, it will leave you nipping at your opponent. The person you don't forgive, Galatians 5:15, here's the way he's put it, you'll "bite and devour one another." In the end, you'll chip away at each other. You'll be in a church that will eventually chip at each other to where you've basically torn the church apart. Secondly, something the Bible calls a whisperer or a gossip. Proverbs Chapter 16 verse 28 talks about how the "whisperer separates close friends." This is the wedge. The whisperer says, I forgive you out loud. And he gets the pat on the back for being virtuous. But then she turns around and she speaks behind the back of those who are willing to listen to the bad stuff she's got to dish out on the person that she says she forgives. But she doesn't really forgive. The garage door came down two-thirds of the way. But Satan still slips in that huge gap under the garage door. Trust me. He's got a wedge here in your life. And he gets a wedge in a lot of churches by people who feel very virtuous about forgiving each other, but they really haven't because they cannot sincerely affirm love for each other.

A gossip. And the problem with gossip, by the way, Proverbs 18:8 is "like delicious morsels." It's like Christmas fudge without nuts in it. My favorite kind. And it's just like they're just jamming that in my ears. That's the picture. Gossip is someone giving you just, "Ah, really? They did that? They steal it. How did that happen?" And then they said, "What? And who else is on your side? And really?" The whisperer, it says, if he's there, the fire of quarreling continues to burn. If the whisperer stops whispering, if the gossip stops gossiping, the quarrel dies out. They're always fanning into flame the quarrel. There are people who say they've forgiven, but they continue to bite and devour. There are people who say that they've forgiven, but they still continue to gossip.

How about this one? Let me update this. Let's just call it a cancerous tumor. Hebrews Chapter 12 verse 15. Hebrews Chapter 12 verse 15, it talks about a "root of bitterness." Do you ever want to talk about a problem of unforgiveness? It really can be described as bitterness. It is in Ephesians 4 and it is right here in Hebrews 12 and it says if that root of bitterness springs up and grows and it will with gnawing at, biting at, devouring each other and gossiping, it will



certainly do that. It will "cause trouble, and by it many become defiled." It's like a cancerous growth that just continues to cause damage in a healthy body. And to the extent that people in this church or in your small group or in your sub-congregation or in your family say they forgive but they really don't forgive, this is what happened. The destruction of the relationship.

Don't settle for a partial substitute. Let me give you two verses real quick in Matthew. Matthew Chapter 6 shows us that this is the ultimate test of your justification. Sincere forgiveness, let me say it again, is the ultimate test of your justification. You got to pass the difficult test of forgiveness and you may say, well I'll wait for the hard stuff later. No, no, no. The hard stuff, that's the ultimate task. It's the ultimate test. It's the ultimate hurdle. You've got to get over this, because this is the test of whether or not you are justified. Matthew 6, I think you know this passage pretty well, it's about the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. It starts in verse 9, "Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread,'" and our cars and our yachts and our houses and all the stuff we want. And then, oh yeah, I guess, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." That's a weird juxtaposition of phrases. I think it would just be, God forgive me for my sins. No, no, forgive me from my sins as we have forgiven the people who have sinned against us. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Interesting how so much evil and temptation comes from unforgiveness.

And then in verse 14, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Does that sound like a quid pro quo? Does that sound like you do this and then I'll do that? It sure does. But you said we're not justified by our works. No, no, no. But I am saying this justification is justified by works and here's a work that is a hard ultimate test: forgive. What kind of forgiveness? Forgive, let it go. And Jesus sometimes inverts things to say it twice just for emphasis. So we can put in our translational imagination a bunch of exclamation points after this. Because then he turns it on its head, verse 15. Let me put it another way for you guys. "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." What does that spell? That's the difference between being a Christian and not being a Christian. If you can't pass this test, which I'm telling you a new heart is going to want to pass and the Holy Spirit is going to absolutely, I mean, this is the thing the Holy Spirit wants you to pass more than anything else. Are you a forgiving person? This is the ultimate test.

I said two passages in Matthew, go to Chapter 18, which if I had more time, I could preach this whole section because it's a great illustration, and I've preached it many times before. You might remember this. The guy who will not forgive his fellow servant begs to be forgiven so much, not because in light of the fact he'd been given so much by his master, he still wasn't willing to forgive his fellow servant. And of course, he'd racked up a bigger debt with the master than he'll ever have anybody rack up against him. And at the end of this parable, drop down to verse 33, he says, "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" I mean, wait a minute, you're forgiven. Shouldn't you be a forgiving person if you've been forgiven? "And in his anger," this is the master now, look at verse 32, "his master summoned him," the servant, verse 32, and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all the debt because you pleaded with me." Now you should have had mercy



because I gave you mercy. "And in his anger," verse 34, "his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt." That's an illustrative way to say this: your heavenly Father will not forgive you. Why? Because you're not forgiving. It's the number one justification of your justification by faith. The thing that shows that you're a real Christian is your ability to do things you wouldn't have had the ability to do before, like forgiving someone who's sinned against you.

And as if we weren't catching this, or maybe someone would say someday in a hermeneutics class, well, this really isn't about forgiveness and hell. Look what he says. Verse 35, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you." What is that? He's going to make you pay for your own sins. "If you do not forgive your brother," period. Oh, it's so good it ends there. Do you see that it ends there? Does it end there? No, that's the Mike Fabarez translation. It doesn't end there. There are three more words that you and I sometimes wish weren't there. "Forgive your brother," here it comes, "from your heart." What does that mean? Well, it means that the Corinthians could not only say, yeah, I forgive you, but also they could run over, embrace them, and genuinely say, I reaffirm my love for you. I love you. That's hard to do if you're not forgiving. Matter of fact, it's impossible. That's a partial, cheap substitute for forgiveness. I'm just trying to tell you, nothing could be more important than you passing the test of forgiving someone. It's one of the tests you're going to have.

I'm not going to time for this but a good homework text for you is Ephesians Chapter 4 verses 31 through Chapter 5 verse 2. Too bad there's a chapter division there, but from 4:31 through 5:2, we're talking about bitterness and slander and clamor, and all the things that are a part of what it means when people are biting and devouring, gossiping and dividing. And the point here is, you've been forgiven, imitate God. And then he calls it a sacrifice. It is a sacrifice, just like every single path of choosing to choose the path of obedience is a sacrifice. I'm saying no to my desires.

It's all predicated on verse 11 of Second Corinthians Chapter 2. And I think we quote this out of context, which is fine, because it is important in every other test of obedience. You can put verse 9 and verse 11 together, but the real challenge is verse 10, forgiveness. But he says in verse 11, "So that," we need to do this, "so that we would not be outwitted by Satan;" What's that all about? Outwitted, outwitted. Eve and Adam were outwitted by Satan, do you agree? They were supposed to choose the path of righteousness. Do not eat from this tree. You can eat from all the others, don't eat from this one, and Satan outwitted them. So we know what Satan wants. He wants you to take the path of unrighteousness, whatever that is. He wants you to fall into that James Chapter 4 reality of knowing the right thing to do but not doing it. And we can pick out a long list of things that are hard to do as Christians, but we're called to do it. And if you don't do it then you're in sin and that's a problem. And Satan is just begging you to go down that path. "Don't be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs."

Now we could start in Genesis to know what the designs are, but you cannot forget the often-unspoken goal. Number three, let's put it this way, you need to "Be Alert to Satan's Goals and Strategies." Number three, be alert to Satan's goals and strategies. And I want to add the





word "goals" even though this passage is about designs or schemes or strategies because strategies are supposed to lead to a goal. Why would anyone have a strategy against me unless they had a goal? What's the goal? Let's go back to the Garden. Adam and Eve, created now in time and space, something new that the angelic class was not. The angelic class had been divided now between those fallen and those who didn't fall. And now Satan, the fallen head of the fallen team, looks at the creation of human beings in time and space and says, I'm going to try and get them to sin. That's the strategy of saying isn't that fruit nice? Doesn't it look good? You know it would be really good for food. And it's going to make you wise because God is only trying to keep you away from wisdom here. You're going to know good and evil. It'll be good. Listen to what he called it. He called it the Tree of Knowledge of God and Evil. You're going to have knowledge you don't have. Just, just eat the fruit. That's the strategy, which is a lot like Israel wanting a king. Eve did not want to miss out. I know I got fruit over here, but this fruit looks better. I know I got stuff to fill my stomach, but that's going to fill my stomach even better. I know all this stuff is going to keep me alive, but that going to make me more like God. I want that. I don't want to miss out.

So that was the strategy. What was the goal? Satan hates God, has nothing to do, really, but try and mess up God's plans. He'd love for more people to follow him. Certainly, misery loves company. He would love to get these people at odds with their maker. He's at odds with his maker. So he's going to try to plummet them into the consequence of what God had already said, "And the day you eat of the fruit, you shall surely die" There's going to be a death. What does that mean? First of all, in relationship. I'm going to mess up these people's relationship with God. Now, that's the ultimate, to divide you and God. That's the goal of so many temptations and strategies. But it can be something different than that. I mean, go to the book of Job in your mind. We know the goal there because Satan stated the goal. He stated the goal and he said, you know, does he love you just because you're a great God? Doesn't he love you because of the good gifts you give him? That's what Mike Fabarez paraphrased, but there it is. And Satan goes, what if I took all those away? And God says, okay. And so what's the strategy? Ten of your kids are going to die. People are going to come and steal all your stuff so you're not going to have any money. You're going to get sick. And a skin disease is going to be painful. And your wife, the piece of work wife here, is going to tell you to curse God and die.

So you going to have a bad marriage, a bad economic situation, a lot of grief from the loss of people. So there's the strategy of saying, what's the goal? Won't he "curse you to your face?" I want this man who you think is all that, to look at you and hate you. That's Satan's goal. I wrote a book called Lifelines for Tough Times. I had to write that book, I felt like, because I think every pastor, every leader, every teacher should grapple with the problem of how can we still say God is good when bad things happen. And that is a challenge, it's called in theology a theodicy, trying to justify the fact that God can still be good when your ten children die and you got a skin disease and the Sabeans came and stole all your cattle. And how can we say God is good? And so here we were diagnosed, a prenatal diagnosis of a daughter with a bad prenatal genetic disability that was going to threaten her life, which we were told she was going to die. And so we had to be able to keep responding to people asking, how can God, how can God, how can God, how can God? Now when you start to say that with



any vehemence and you start saying, I don't blame... Why me? Why me? When you do that Satan is achieving what he wants to achieve to get you to turn on God. And the strategy all it takes is a little bit of pain. So these tests need to be understood. And Satan is trying to give you these tests to fail you. And to fail you is to really ruin everything between you and God.

What was it here in Corinth? Well, clearly, this is about unforgiveness. What's it going to do? Well, it's going to take them back into First Corinthians Chapters 1 and 2, where people were going to be so divided that the church was going to end up, let's just put it in terms of Revelation Chapters 2 and 3, the lampstand would go out. Satan wants this good, thriving church in a very wealthy part of the world, here in what is today northern Greece, I want this church to die. That's what Satan wants. That's the goal. What's the strategy? Unforgiveness, partial forgiveness, leaving the garage door mostly closed but not fully. They can't affirm their love for each other but they say they forgive to deceive themselves about the virtues of forgiveness. Why? Because I don't want that lampstand there. I hate the light. You got to know the strategy, you got to look to the goal. God wants this church to be like the churches you see on your Instagram reels, with the rainbow flags out in front, and the blue-haired female pastors, and that's what he wants for this place. And here's how he's going to get us there. How did that Methodist church down the street or whatever, how did they get to the place they are? Because Satan came to the old ladies and sat them in the back in the sacrament somewhere and said, hey, you know what? What we're going to do here is we're going to have you drink blood out of a skull and listen to Ozzy Osborne all day long. That didn't happen, and that wouldn't have worked with the old ladies in the church. Do you know what did work? What worked is Second Corinthians Chapter 11, and that is, don't you know that "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light?"

You know, that church thinks they're way more loving than this church. You know that, right? And I'm not talking about any particular one, but all those churches that sit there and say, you know, we're the church of love. We're the church of acceptance, the church down the block that's still preaching the Bible like they really believe that the Bible is true, those churches are judgmental. Those churches are angry. Those churches are phobic. Those churches, they do not love like we love. False teaching is one of Satan's number one strategies because you can eventually, it doesn't take a lot of false teaching, gut the gospel of its saving power. So let's get there. How do we get there? Satan's strategy is you can be more loving, be more loving, and be more loving, you need to be more loving. Love is not telling people lies about God, right? It's about telling the truth. You want to speak the truth in love. I don't know how to do that in a world than other to say, you may not like what we're saying, but we're not going to back down from what we're saying. We have to pass the test because Satan's goals for a church like ours is to shut down this church. He can do it internally through division. He can do it externally by us being so intimidated by the culture that we're going to change our message. The goal of Satan is to mess up good theology. The goal is Satan is to see God as bad. The goal of Satan is to divide our church. The goal of Satan is to shut down our lampstand. The goal of Satan is to displease God and hurt you.

Let's talk about one that goes on in the secrecy of your own heart. Let's talk first about the strategy. The strategy according to Revelation Chapter 12 verse 10 and Zechariah Chapter 3,



believe it or not, Zechariah Chapter 3 verses 1 and 2, is that Satan loves to accuse us. And when you start to believe the accusation in a way that makes you think, well, if that's true, then I'm a piece of dirt and I can't do anything for God. All I can do is sit around all day, look in the mirror and see how horrible I am, and say I can do nothing for God. You will stunt your Christian growth by being demoralized over believing the accusations. And here's the thing, I love the strategy of the angel of the Lord in Zechariah Chapter 3. Because when Satan is accusing Joshua, not the Joshua of Moses' day, but Joshua, the high priest in the post-exilic period, here he's getting all this junk thrown at him, and the angel goes, yep, yep, yep. All that's true, but that doesn't matter. I'm going to robe him in righteousness. And that's the point.

If you're sitting here coming to grips with your own depravity and that you are a sinner, that you've sinned, that should never demoralize you because Christ came to save sinners. That's the whole point. And according to Paul's testimony, God chose someone like him who was murdering Christians to show you God's perfect patience toward those who would believe. So stop gazing at yourself in the mirror, saying I'm so terrible, I can't do anything. Satan's strategy is to immobilize you so that you don't serve God, so you don't evangelize, so that you're not a blessing to anybody, because you're all wrapped up in your attention in yourself. Stop it. That's Satan's strategy. You've got to pass this test. You've got to know his goal, and then you start looking at the strategy, starting to hate the strategy as much as you hate the goal. Eve should have hated that she ever had a feeling that she was missing out. And Adam, he didn't want to miss out on his wife's fallen state so he just followed along. You should never have warmed up to the idea of the temptation. You should have known where the temptation is leading. And if I can get you to think a little bit about Satan's goals when you think about his strategies, why is unforgiveness such a big deal? Why isn't just partially closing the garage door a problem? Because Satan is going to exploit that. You've got to shut these things all the way. You've got to pass these tests.

You may be sitting here thinking, well, I'm fine, I am fine. And maybe you have been. Like some of you get to the age where you have to go take a road test again at the DMV, any of you there yet? You're like, I don't even know if the DMV is still operational, they just send me a new license every few years. And then all of a sudden, they say, now you got to come down for a road test. So some 70-something dude goes in there and looks at this young drivers-test dude sitting next to him with his ponytailed beard and his spectacles and whatever, tie-dye shirt, yeah, and he's got his clipboard, now he's ready to test your driving skills. And you think you know what? I've never had an accident, you know, I've been a good driver and you start thinking I've been driving longer than you've been alive. You have all these thoughts of dispersion and at some point you start to vocalize that because you fumbled for your seat belt, you didn't, you know, check your mirrors when you took a lane change, you rolled through a stop sign and you failed and then you're really mad. And you say to this young guy, this is absurd. I've had a perfect driving record. And he should rightly respond to you, and I want him to respond this way, it has nothing to do with your past record, right? This has to do with the challenge you're going to have on the freeway or on the side streets tomorrow, next week, next month.



And so you may have gone through a lot of your Christian life without a lot of big crossroads. Or you may be thinking, you know, I've done fine. I've passed all the tests. I don't need a sermon like this, a heavy sermon on Palm Sunday of all weekends. And I'm just going to tell you this, I think it's not about your past, it's about your future. And I don't know what God's preparing you for, but know this, a lot of the greatest tests for the people in the Bible, like Abraham, like Moses, came very late in their lives. Because God was preparing for something in that life that was going to be very fruitful and productive. So whether you're 15 or 85, I want you to think about passing the test this week. I want you to recognize there's a lot at stake, it doesn't matter how old you are, it doesn't matter what you've done or what you haven't done. Let's get ready to pass some tests.

Let's pray. God, help us as Christians who recognize we live in a day where we have a lot of external pressure that maybe we didn't have, at least not in the vehemence that we have it now, but the internal pressures are just the same. And I know Corinth, as we think about that church, has plenty of external pressures. So we're not unique. And certainly the challenges we face with unforgiveness or feeling left out or feeling like we're not going to have the fun that the rest of the world does, or whatever it might be, there are plenty of things. Sacrificing, giving, serving, evangelizing, all these things that are so costly. I just pray we get back to our first response to you. That when the King says, follow me, he means it, and that we need to follow him with full trust of a good shepherd. He says, I know this is going to be hard, but you've got to deny yourself and take up your cross. Let us today say that we're going to look more carefully and more discerningly for these tests, whether it's forgiveness or anything else, we're going to make sure we identify the Satan who wants to destroy and steal, wants to murder, wants to kill, wants the shut things down, and we want to pass these tests. So please, God, please just give us the wherewithal, the strength of your Spirit to pass the test that we face today, tomorrow, and in the weeks to come.

In Jesus' name. Amen.