



True Strength – Part 4

The Vanity of Self-Preservation

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Well, just about every piece of advice that the world is going to give you is going to point in one direction, and you know what direction that is. It's going to be pointed right at you. It's going to point at you. And not only is the world going to tell you that life should be all about you, but it's going to tell you that all your effort and energy and vigilance should be about protecting yourself and all that you happen to achieve or amass. You should certainly protect your schedules. You should protect your heart, your emotions. You should protect your finances. You should protect your peace of mind. You should protect your boundaries. I mean, they go on and on about all the things you ought to protect. So self-love and self-preservation, those two elements they basically make up the entirety of our generation's philosophy, that in essence really boils it down to the key elements.

I just wonder if you make a claim to Christ, if you claim to be a Christian this morning, what happens to Christians if we become as risk-averse as the rest of the world? What happens when a church and its people if we become as insulated from all the loss, the potential loss, and all the potential harm that the world is trying to avoid? Back to the world for a minute. When Jesus talked about the world at the end of time, he said in Matthew Chapter 24 verse 12, here's how he described it, he says, "the love of many will grow cold." It's an interesting line he throws in "the love of many will grow cold." Now, at least the way that love has been explained in the Bible because elsewhere the Holy Spirit in Second Timothy Chapter 3 describes in verse 2, there's something going on in terms of love at the end of time that's very much advancing. It says this, "people will be lovers of selves," so there's plenty of love. It's just that it's all turned inward. So as we advance toward the end of time, in this present dispensation of time, everyone's going to love themselves a lot more.

In the very next verse, it says something else that's translated in various ways, depending on the translation. The English Standard Version translates it this way, they will be heartless, heartless. Some old translations translated it this way. There will be a loss of natural affection. It's a compound word with a negation at the beginning "A" and then the word "Storge." It means that the kinds of love that would normally extend to others won't be there. There will be plenty of love, it's just that the love is internal. So it will be that from observation "the love of many will grow cold." But they'll be all about having that interest turned inside the love themselves. So I guess what happens when the church starts to reflect the risk aversion of the rest of the world, what happens when we are as insulated as the world and say well, we're not going to take those risks. We have to be careful. We don't want to lose anything that we've gained in terms of our lives. Well, I guess to put it in terms of Christ, we become an unloving church. That's what happens. We become a loveless group of people. We're people who don't love. I mean, that's what happens. We become people that love ourselves.

Now, Jesus said that should be, according to John Chapter 13, the distinguishing characteristic of the Church. We're supposed to be the people while the culture continues to deteriorate in terms of turning their love inwardly, we're supposed to be the organization that



continues to express love outwardly. We should be the organization where we continue to move outwardly. But if that's going to happen, there has to be a fighting with this feeling of saying I don't want to take these risks. We cannot have an aversion to risk because all love, it's going to feel like a big risk, and it always does. And ministry that the Apostle Paul we've been learning about has been engaged in and talking about and even defending his ministry in Second Corinthians Chapter 12, actually he's been doing it now for three chapters defending his ministry, it's been all about the risks that he's taken in ministry to the Corinthians, because there's no really separating the two. If you are ministering to people, at least biblically, you're doing it because you love those people. And if you love those people you're taking risks and you're risking a lot of things. You are risking your state of mind, you're risking your time, you're risking your finances, you're risking all of that. And frankly, for the Apostle Paul in Second Corinthians it wasn't going very well. That's the whole point of him being made a fool, right? He's been forced into being foolish by defending himself, because when he left Corinth the critics stepped in and they started bashing him behind his back, denigrating Paul's reputation. And they actually did a pretty good job.

They started to, at least in the rank and file, you know, Bible study groups of Corinth, they started to doubt that the Apostle Paul was even an apostle. And he's writing them to say guys, stop. You forced me into this. He said this at the beginning of our last section we were studying in verse 11. He said, "I've been a fool," in all this self-defense. Verse 11, "You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you." That's where we started last week. "I ought to have been commended by you." And of course, flip that over. I wasn't, you didn't. And that's a painful thing to say. I've done all this for you and I took a big risk here and what should have happened didn't happen, and that was painful.

So we start our section here today. I only studied with you three verses last time, 11, 12 and 13. But let's pick it up in verse 14. If you haven't turned there yet please do. Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verses 14 through 18. We'll try to tackle this morning five verses. And he starts in verse 14 doing something seemingly unthinkable. He says, you know, I was there last time. It didn't go well. I was there earlier before and we see letters in response to that. And there were a lot of things that didn't go well the first time. And he says, "Here for the third time I'm ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden." Now remember this. The critics were saying, you might remember all this detail, if not, this will sound, you know, kind of complicated. But we learned about this client-patron relationship that philosophers and theologians, if you're going to be a theologian, like a philosopher, you should have if you're of any import in the ancient world, you should certainly be paying your resident philosophers or slash theologians. And Paul wasn't doing that. He was coming as a missionary and he wasn't being paid for it and he didn't ask for anybody's money. And so they were denigrating the Apostle Paul because if he was anybody important he certainly would be charging for this and he wasn't. And so these very, you know, uppity supposed apostles, as Paul sarcastically called them, the hyper apostles or the super-apostles, they said, you know, Paul was nothing if he wasn't charging.

And so this little phrase not being a burden to you means I know I didn't charge you last night, I'm not going to charge you this time. I'm going to go back and do the same thing I did before.



I know I got criticized for that but I'm going to double down on doing the kind of ministry I did last time. Why? Because "I seek not what is yours." I'm not trying to get into your pockets, but I seek you. I'm going to keep trying to build this ministerial relationship with you. I'm going to keep trying to serve you. I'm going to keep trying to build you up. I founded this church we read about in the book of Acts. I gave my life to build this church. And now I'm going to come back a third time, and I'm going to try my very best to repair this, to minister to you, as we'll learn in Second Corinthians Chapter 13 in our next series, he's going to do things there that he hopes are going to edify them.

And what about this money thing that became such a contentious issue with the critics? Well, "children," middle of verse 14, "are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children," right? I am someone here of importance in your life. I'm the church planter. I led you guys to Christ and I'm an apostle, I'm an authority and he's been defending that. And he says, of course I'm not going to charge you. And that's why. Speaking of spending now it gets metaphorical. And then it's an analogy in verse 15, "I will most gladly spend," not only financially, but much more broadly than that, "and be spent." Why? Because I want you. I want "your souls." I want to be able to have this relationship with you. I want us to have this connection that we should have. And "if I love you more," because that's what this is about, I love you guys, "am I to be loved less?" Because that's the way it's been.

So it hasn't been going well but I'm doubling down on this. I took risks and the risks haven't paid off, but I'm going to engage in some more risk. I'm going to continue to risk. I'm going to keep going. Paul was not risk adverse. Can you see that? And then he starts talking about his friends that he sent. Now we learned about his friends earlier. Titus is one and then there was a weird one that he said was this brother, this unnamed brother who everybody respected. And he was unnamed for whatever reason. We don't know exactly why. We can guess at it. And we tried to guess at it when we ran into him earlier when the discussion was about the financial gift that was being transported. And anyway, we got into that a little bit. But here he shows up again. We're about to run into this brother again. And so the two guys who came in follow up, probably couriering the letter that the Apostle Paul wrote, he's going to talk about them for a minute. He says in Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 16, "But granting that I myself did not burden you," in other words, I didn't get any money out of you, I wasn't there for the money. "I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit." In the end is it that the accusation is that I really was getting into your pocket, not directly but indirectly? "Did I take advantage of you," verse 17, "through any of those whom I sent to you," maybe it was Titus. Maybe it was the brother. "I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?" Those are rhetorical questions. And the answer is, of course we did. Yes, Titus was just the same as I am and the brother, the unnamed brother, was exactly the same way. Of course, we were all about love. We were all about service. We were all about ministry. We all only had your well-being in view, which is what love is all about.

This passage is about service. But ultimately as you see the title of the series has been for the past four weeks, it's about strength. It's about True Strength. And I'll tell you one thing about self-love, it's weak. It's vain. It's ridiculous. It's insulated. It's you being cocooned in



yourself and just doing whatever you think is best for you. True strength is being able to say I'm going to take the risks that God calls us to take, which is where true life is found, not in trying to preserve, but taking the risks to truly love. Many of you have done that at least domestically. One of the unique things about the Church is that we're called to do that in a communal sense within our family here, the spiritual community that we have, to start to love these people so much that we're using phrases, familial phrases like brother and sister, even though they're not my genetic brother and sister. And we become family here and we care for one another as though we are our brother and sister. And we minister. Minister is the word to serve. We're ready to serve. And the concern in Corinth, as Paul cares about them, is that we can serve them spiritually. We try to help them grow in Christ.

There are two primary things we're trying to do as I try to lean into in the discussion questions on the back of the worksheet, and that is that we want to make sure everyone becomes a real Christian and then we want them, as it says in the Great Commission, to learn to observe or to keep or to obey all that Christ commanded. We want to help people grow up in Christ after they become real Christians. That's our ultimate concern. Those have eternal ramifications. So we'd like to help people in that. That's why people serve in the church. That's why people run small groups in the church. That's why people take people through our discipleship program called Partners. That's why people engage in serving in Camp Compass or going as someone who leads in our high school camp or our junior high camp. These are things we do to serve, to help people become followers of Christ and become obedient Christians.

And there are all kinds of challenges along the way as First Corinthians testifies to. We have questions. What do we do about this? What do we do about that? What happens when this problem comes up and Paul is there to serve, to serve, to serve, to serve. And he takes the risks of serving through letter, through counsel, in person and a lot of times it doesn't go very well, as we've been attesting to in the last two chapters. And now all of a sudden in Second Corinthians Chapter 12, all the trouble kind of hits a fever pitch as he's defending himself and he says, you know, you guys should have had my back. You don't have my back. Hey, I'm coming. And he doesn't threaten them here with I'm coming with a whip. He says I'm coming back because I want you. I want a relationship with you. I want to keep serving you. I love you like a parent loves a child. And the guys I'm hanging out with, the guys I'm partnering with, I'm teaming with, they're just like me. They love you too. We're here to serve. It's not about self-love. All right, there's the context.

Let's just start with the first half of verse 14. And let's just understand the problem that we're going to have. And it's not just the first part of your testimony because if you happen to be a Christian here I know your testimony is like my testimony, and we like to lean into the contrast. And there is a contrast and I get it. Clearly there's a contrast, because when the Bible starts to illustrate our non-Christian life it likes the metaphor, and it's repeated, that we're "all like sheep have gone astray." We can all lean into that, and we can all pick out examples in our non-Christian life where we're doing this and we're doing that. We don't much care about the Good Shepherd. We can use that in the Old Testament, Psalm 23, and we understand God has a path for us, and he is our God, and we should follow him and his precepts. And his "word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path." We should follow the



Good Shepherd. And then Christ comes along, Colossians Chapter 2 verse 9], he says okay now, Christ is "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily," deity dwells right here in Christ, and he comes as our Redeemer. And he says, I'm the Good Shepherd. "My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me," John Chapter 10 verse 27. So you become a Christian and all of a sudden you say, yeah, I was wandering, doing my own thing and then I realized that I was a sinner doing my own thing. It was going to lead to death, a broad road. And I became a Christian by God's grace; he drew me to himself. I heard his voice, I followed him, I repented of my sins, I put my trust in Christ, and now I'm following Christ.

Now that's a great, you know, bifurcated story. Doing my own thing, now I follow Christ. Now that's great. And you can say this is selfishness over here, my pre-Christian life, and now I'm an obedient Christian over here. Now you should start to smirk right now if you've been a Christian for any amount of time, because it's not that clean of a bifurcation, is it? No, I mean, that's generally true. But here's the deal. It is easy for us, even as Christians, to recognize the redemptive work of God is not completed yet. Would you all agree with that? You don't have to say Amen or get riled up because we're not that kind of church. But you do realize that is true. I can ask your spouse if you really need empirical affirmation of this. Romans Chapter 8 says we don't quite have redemption finished. It talks about salvation in the future tense. It talks about the redemption of the body. We're waiting and groaning for the fulfillment of all that God said he would do for us. And that is we're still here in this body, First Peter Chapter 2, where there are "passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." Or as it's put in First John Chapter 2 verse 4, if you say you have no sin you're a liar, right? "The truth is not in you." Or James Chapter 3 verse 2 says, "We all stumble in many ways."

So you're always going to fight this temptation to be a selfish, self-preserving, self-loving person and you're going to have to fight that. That's the draw. That's the pull. And so when he says here for the third time I'm ready to come to you, and he says I'm going to come and be like I was before, I'm not going to charge you, I'm not coming to retaliate. You just need to know this, that Paul, because he's still unredeemed in his flesh, I'm sure had the temptation of just forget them. I'm going to Philippi. I mean, if I'm going to go anywhere, if I'm the Apostle Paul, I'm going to Thessalonica, because I've read those two letters. Those guys were rocking. That's a good church. If I want to go and be encouraged, I'm going to go to Thessalonica. I don't want to go to Corinth. If I'm going to read all of Paul's letters multiple times as I have, I would much rather go to Thessalonica. That's my favorite church. I'm not sure I'm going to hang out in Corinth.

And yet here, I even like the way this starts, that's an imperative. "Here for the third time I'm ready to come to you." I don't know that I'd be so ready because I'm tempted to be risk-averse. Number one, you need to "Reject the Pull of Self-Preservation." The Apostle Paul is showing us a good example of what it looks like to be a godly person, to engage in counter-intuitive patterns of really resisting that temptation and saying I know I could want to avoid the difficult and challenging situations where I feel like it hasn't gone well, it's difficult, I don't want to keep doing this. Just know that that's always going to be your temptation. Our sinful default is selfishness. It always will be selfishness. I know your non-Christian life was not filled with, you know, Bible studies and prayer lives and prayer meetings. But you do know when James



is addressing the people in James Chapter 4 and their prayer lives, here are these people praying as I hope you are praying. If you went to the National Equipped Conference, you hopefully have a boost in your prayer life. Or you should go to our bookstore and read at least the book that we put together for that on prayer. You read through that, you get encouraged to pray, you start to pray. But here James says, you know, when you're praying, here's one of the problems, let me just address this, you prayer group attending people. He says when you pray, it seems like your prayers are really selfish. When you pray, you're praying, and you're praying with wrong motives because you're just praying for stuff so that you can just spend it on your pleasures, the stuff that you want. Think about it. Here's a bunch of people who are actually doing the Christian stuff. They're engaging in spiritual disciplines and here James has to say, still selfish.

Do you think you could do ministry in a selfish way? Sure. You can get very selective about the kinds of things that you do. You can be very selective about the kinds of ministries you do. You can be very selective about the kind of people you talk to in the lobby after this church service is over. You can be very selective because you are into self-preservation as a default. You're selfish as a default. Even as a Christian, you need to fight this. Now, I know your core desires, I understand sanctification, I understand regeneration at least as best as I can, and I understand this, you have a core desire to want to follow Christ. I get that. But we struggle with these passions and we have to say, okay God, I have to do the opposite of self-preservation and self-love and that's called biblical love. And that means I have to love the way Christ taught us to love. And that's always to fight the pull, the draw, the temptation of saying I have to protect myself. I have to protect myself. I have to protect myself.

Love will always feel like a risk and love is what should fuel ministry. And let me put it this way, if ministry doesn't feel like a risk then you're doing it wrong. Did you catch that? If ministry to you feels like this is great, right? Then something's wrong. Ministry is always driven by love, and love is going to drive ministry in such a way that it's not a slalom race through all the troubles and all the problem people and all the challenges. It's always ready as you've heard Mike Fabarez say before, it's always ready to stay the extra hour, always ready to go the extra mile, always ready to spend the extra dollar. And those are things that are like magnets in every ministry that can draw you to those. So I'm going to do it. I see the need, I'm going to meet it. Love is the opposite of self-preservation. Love will always feel like a risk. Ministry, real loving ministry, will always feel the same. Paul had risked in his ministry in Corinth and now he was ready to risk again.

I like to put it this way. Ministry is not something you try. Some of you here have become Christians and you really haven't engaged in much ministry. Ministry is service. You haven't done much yet. And you're on the bench and you're about to get off the bench and do something. We talk about around here you have to get in your chairs that are side by side. That's attending. You got to get in your chairs face to face. That's connecting. And then you have to get out of your chair. Or as I just put it off the bench and you have to have a ministry post. You have to start serving. Attending, connecting, serving and giving. Those are the four aspects of being involved in a church. Those are just basic. So I'm saying if you're about to get off the bench and serve, if that's part of what you recognize and God is about to get you



there, you're not going to just try this. Please know that you don't try ministry. You do it because First Peter Chapter 4 says it is your stewardship. Now, I know that's a Bible word, but stewardship means this is your responsibility of the varied grace of God. And that means this varied grace. Grace means gift. God has gifted each person. God has given you some aptitude, some insight, some discernment, some skill. He's given you something that is varied. It's different than the guy you're sitting next to. It's different than the guy who is in front of you in the row, the back of the head you're staring at. That guy has a different aptitude than you do. And that difference, that varied gift, you're supposed to engage in that.

As First Corinthians 12 says God has "given the manifestation of the Spirit," his gift, and his endowment, "for the common good." That's why the Pentecostals and the Charismatics get it wrong when they think God is giving you gifts for you to sit in a closet and enjoy. Your gifts are not given for you to enjoy. God's giving you gifts somehow to benefit the common good, to do something for the good of the Church. That's why you get to get out of your chair or off the bench and you need to serve. All I want to tell you it's not something you're going to try. I think I'll try it. When I was growing up, this may be ancient history for some of you, but in LA here they had a campaign called 'Try God.' Are any of you old enough to remember that gray hairs? No? Okay. Just me. I'm ready for the nursing home, obviously. But try God, the 'Try God' campaign. You used to see it, you know, on the billboards. Try God, try God. I thought that was the dumbest thing even as a kid, right? I had at least enough brain cells to know that doesn't sound right. I read the Bible enough to know that doesn't sound right. We're not trying God like a new pair of tennis shoes or something. Try God. Try this on. How does this feel? That's not you. Don't try the creator of the universe to see if you like him. And then you toss him back in the shoe pile. That doesn't make any sense, right? God is God. This is not an invitation. It's a command, right? He doesn't say, hey, hey, do you want to date me? That's not how God works, right? He calls you to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him. That's what he tells you to do.

So it's the same thing with ministry. You have a responsibility. You don't just try it. Because here's the thing. When you engage in ministry, if you're going to try it then as soon as you hit a problem you're going to quit it. That's what'll happen. And if you're a steward, you can't quit it when you hit a problem. Remember the old line where the patient comes to the doctor and he says, doc, it hurts when I do this. What does the doctor say? Don't do that. That's how most people treat ministry if they try it. If they try it and it hurts then their friend goes, don't do that anymore. Matter of fact, I've said this in the series already, but in Mark Chapter 3 you can look it up on your own, Mary, the one the Catholics so revere, the mother of Jesus and his brothers show up and they say, oh, you don't even have time to eat. You need some me time, Jesus. And they said he's out of his mind. They said too much. To "mucho hijo." It's time for you to get some, you know, siesta time. I don't know why I turned to Spanish all of a sudden, (audience laughing) but time for you to take a break. Take a break, man. Think about this. And you need to stop. They could see it was costing Jesus. Do you know why? Because he couldn't even find time to eat. It's hurting you. People are going to say that to you in ministry, it's taking up too much time. It seems like it's really bothering you. Do you remember when Paul said earlier in our study in Second Corinthians, and upon me also is the "my anxiety of



all the churches"? If you're a good friend of Paul, you seem like you're carrying too much on your shoulders, really weighing you down. You have a lot of anxiety right now.

If you want to try ministry, you'll stop ministry, I guarantee you. You don't try it. Paul's not trying it. Because if you're trying it, you're not going to go back the third time. You're not going to go back the third time. He sees himself as someone with a responsibility to the Corinthians. And love is a commitment. He's committed to these people and he's going to serve them. Your instinct is self-preservation and it will tempt you over and over and over and over and over again. Every time you're disappointed, every time you're hurt, every time your expectations are not met, every time something happens that doesn't make you feel good or some friend of yours sees you despondent or frustrated or hurt, they're going to say you should stop. Let me be your therapist. You should stop.

If you invest in the stock market I hope you could stand up, take the microphone off my head and you could tell people, if you're going to start doing what the investors do, you do not stop investing the first time your stock ticker starts to go down. I'm out of this, man. Look at the stock. Look what the stocks did today, right? Of course not. The first time your stocks start to lose money you don't stop. You expect that. Right? You expect that. And let me put it this way. When it comes to our investment in ministry we're investing in a company, let's put it that way, that our Father owns, that our elder brother, to use biblical terms, is the Lord of, the CEO of. Now does that change it a little bit? I'm going to invest my money in Dad's business which my elder brother, the Lord, who happens to be perfect, is running. And if the stock goes down because I have a little pain, the dividend wasn't what I wanted it to be this quarter, it's okay. I keep investing every month, every paycheck, I keep putting money into this. I don't stop because some problem arises. People's needs are always going to override my temptation to self-preservation.

Back to our text, he uses this great line, Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 14, "I seek not what is yours," I'm trying to get something out of this, "but you," I want you. "For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." This is a great transition to the second thing that needs to be said in this passage. Children are not obligated to save for their parents. I'm coming and I'm not there to get from you, I'm coming to give. I want to give because I want to enhance and augment you. I want to edify you. I want to equip you. I want to bring comfort and help to your life. I'm doing this because I love you like a parent loves a child. I'm not trying to get from you. "I will most gladly," verse 15, "spend and be spent for your souls." That's what I want.

You know talking about our young couples' group, the pastor up here earlier giving announcements about that, of course he knows what it's like to have kids and raise some kids. If some young couple just married comes to him in that group on a Thursday night and says hey, Pastor Roi, we're thinking of having some kids, what do you think? Right? He needs to say a few things to them that should be inherent to the question. But, you know, here's something that an average person might say, kids are expensive. I mean, you should think that way. And I'm thinking, well, no, you should think a little bit higher than that, because kids aren't really expensive. Matter of fact, if someone in our young marrieds group has a kid this



week, it's not expensive at all. Matter of fact, you take that kid, drop that child off, that baby, at any firehouse on the front steps, and it's absolutely free. Walk away. I've heard that's a new law, right? I mean, I don't know, 20 years ago or whatever. That baby won't cost you a dime.

It's not children who are expensive, right? It's love that's expensive. Because if you love that child, that child is going to cost you a ton. It's going to cost you money, obviously, it's going to cost you time and cost you sleep and cost you your energy. It's going to cost you a ton of stress in your marriage. Trust me. It's going to cost you a lot because you love the child. See, this whole sermon is about love. Really, it's about love. True strength is really about being willing to love the people God has called you to fellowship with in your church, and that's moving you to do something. Love is to serve them and to serve them that's going to be risky and strong people are willing to risk. Weak people just want to self-preserve. You have to be willing to embrace that cost. Number two, "Embrace the Cost of Self-Sacrifice" because love is expensive. Love is going to cost you freedom. Love is going to cost you energy. Love is going to cost you a lot of things that you have to say I do want to love. That is the characteristic of real Christianity. John Chapter 13 verse 34. If you are my disciples, then it'll be clear to the world, because you will be characterized by love. "By this all men will know you're my disciple, if you have love for one another."

By the way he said, this is a little Greek word, "Kathōs." He said, if you have love just as I loved you, just as, kathōs. How did he love? It used to be in the Old Testament, Leviticus put it this way, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Okay? That's a standard that's pretty good. That'll keep people for thousands of years going at a pretty good clip of treating people pretty well. But Jesus comes along and he ups the ante. That's why First John says you've had an old commandment. Now you've heard that old commandment from the beginning. But now I'm going to give you a new commandment, and the new commandment is true in Christ. And what's the new commandment? You should love one another just as, kathōs, Christ loves you. That upped it, because Christ didn't love us the way people love themselves. He loved us in like a turbo-charged way. He laid down his life. Not just his life Philipians Chapter 2 says he died and he not only just died a death, he died a death "even death on a cross." This is an extreme kind of sacrifice. Yeah, it's going to cost. Right? But you should embrace that cost and it's okay. It's okay because it's the cost that Christ was willing to pay. And this is the CEO. This is our elder brother. This is the same company. Let's make it more personal. This is the same child that he invested in.

Do you remember the story? Let's kind of mix metaphors here. When Jesus talked about this thing, he was building like a seed, a mustard seed, and he says it's little, it's going to be planted, the smallest seed that they knew at the time, smallest seed planted and it's going to grow into a big tree and it's going to have all these branches spread out, and then all the birds will be able to land in it and find their nests in it, but it's going to grow. All these stories about leaven and bread and all this growing stuff, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. About the growth of the Church, the growth of the Kingdom principle and the truth growing "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Until we get back to the whole millennial truth and kingdom of what he promised to Israel. But what's the point here? That he started this thing and it was hard. Of course, the foundation, the predicate of it all is his death on a cross. But it was more



than that. Think about it. He was dealing with people who were problem people. He had people like Peter and people like Thomas. He had people like Andrew, he had people like Philip, people who, if you read carefully in the text of the gospels, weren't always easy to deal with.

Matter of fact, he says at one point, looking at the generation of people he was dealing with and he says, "how long am I to bear with you?" That's not like a hallmark moment for Christ and his disciples. How long must I put up with you? That's not on any DaySpring cards in our bookstore. We won't see that with the Bible verse etched on the bottom of it. What holiday would you give that for? Right? How long must I put up with you? They don't make divorce cards so I don't know where you'd put that. But he felt that, that's anguish. That's difficulty. That's affliction. And the answer was, well, it depends on when he did it during his earthly ministry but I know the totality. It couldn't be any longer than three and a half years. That's how long he was dealing with those people, at least in the public ministry of Christ, from the baptism of John until the Ascension. There was a temporal time and then what? The Church is over? No, the Church was just budding. It was just a little fledgling, you know, sapling with a couple of stakes next to it and it was just starting to grow. And then what? Then we had the first century, then we had the second century and then the 15th century. Now we have the 21st century. And guess what? It's our turn now. We're cultivating this tree. We're babysitting this child. We now. Have you been a Christian for a while? There are people who need to become Christians this week. There are people who need to become Christians this month. There are new Christians who need to be discipled this year and it's our turn. We now are the parents investing in this child. And guess what? There's a lot of spit up. There are a lot of diapers to change. There is a lot of stuff to put up with because love is expensive.

Colossians Chapter 1 verse 24. Paul talks to the Colossians and he says, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake." I'm happy to suffer for the Colossians. What? Yeah, I'm happy to do that. So he's suffering for the Philippians. He's suffering for the Bereans. He's suffering for the Thessalonians. He's suffering for the Corinthians. He's a traveling apostolic missionary. He says, I'm "suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I'm filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." What in the world could be lacking in Christ's afflictions? Nothing when it comes to the cross. He said, "it is finished" when it comes to the redemptive afflictions of Christ on a cross. That's different. That's in a category by itself. But you know when he says how long must they put up with you? Well, that was temporal. He's gone. He's done with the earthly putting up with people in the church. Right? This was the preliminary days before the Church officially started. But you know what? Every generation has had to put up with building the Church. It's our turn now. So you have to deal with the people as he says now for the sake of his body that is the Church. The baby is Christ's body. I know that's a metaphor, but it's so closely loved by God, so intimately connected, that to love God's people is to love God himself. Embrace the cost of self-sacrifice.

Think about loving children especially young children. It's pretty much a one-way street as the Apostle Paul is trying to make clear with the illustration. Children save up. They're obligated to save up for their parents. No, it's the parents who save up and make sure they have enough to buy the groceries for the kids. They are the ones who are obligated. So you expect nothing.



It's not like, you know, on the fourth time, driving up to the Costco gas station to fill it up, fill up your minivan. You don't say, okay, junior this one's on you. I filled up the last three times. There's never that discussion that goes on because it's your obligation to keep the minivan gas tank full. That's how this works. As I put it, when it comes to your ministry you don't quit, because you're not expecting anything in return. That's what love is. Love ultimately, it's like I don't expect anything in return. Jesus underscored that time and time and time and time again.

Two passages to jot down. I'll quickly refer to them, Luke Chapter 6 verses 35 and 36. He says this, "lend, expecting nothing in return." Now I'm going to change the verb if you're going to define it that way. It ain't a loan if I'm not expecting it back. Right? He's a little bait-and-switch in this little sentence here, "lend, expecting nothing in return." You may want a loan but when I'm giving you this, it sounds like a gift to me, Jesus. "Lend, expecting nothing in return." So here's the thing. I'm going to give and I'm expecting nothing back. And if you do that, it says, "your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High." You're a chip off the old block. Why? Because "he's kind to the ungrateful." That's the thing about people you're lending to. They don't go, oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you so much because they expect to pay back. But then a lot of times they're like the Corinthians. They act like they're going to pay back. But then, you know, somebody whispers in their ear, you know, Paul's kind of a jerk. Okay. Yeah, you're right. And where honor is due and respect is due they don't pay him back. And Paul and you the next time you're disappointed, can you keep going?

How about this one, Luke Chapter 14. Someone invited Jesus to a banquet and he says let's talk about banquets. You give a banquet and you give a banquet for your rich relatives and your rich neighbors. Be careful when you do that. Maybe you should invite people like "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." If you do that, then I know "you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you." And you'll have to be repaid, "you will be repaid at the resurrection of the," righteous, in the English Standard Version it says, "the just." That's the same word in Greek, the righteous. The just and the righteous are the same word. You're going to be in the kingdom of God rewarded by God himself. God loves to reward people who are just a chip off the old block. "Sons of the Most High." God gives all the time and he's on the losing end of the quid pro quo, right? He doesn't have people fawning over him for all the gifts that he gives, all the ministry that he does.

Then there's this phrase. Look at our text if you're still on it, "I will most gladly spend and be," here's the word, "spent for your souls." I just wonder about that phrase. Can we kind of see the virtue of that spent? You know what that phrase means, to be spent. When was the last time you said it? I'm spent, I'm spent, I'm spent. If you did raise a family, I know you said it around 11:00 on December 25th, probably for multiple years. That's the time we all say it. For me at 10:00, 10 a.m.. It's when the house is a mess and no one wants to clean anything up. And your wife's chirping at you to put wrapping in trash bags. No. I'm spent. And you know what that equals? Here's the equal sign, I'm plopping on this couch and you're not going to be able to move me. And I may close my eyes. I know I'm only 35. This is what I said when the kids were small, but I'm going to lie on this couch like I'm 65 and I'm spent. Because when



you say I'm spent and when I say I'm spent, that means I'm done. Is that what Paul, man, when he said I'm spent? No. Because here is this weird adverb in front of it, "gladly." I'm gladly. I'll "gladly spend and be spent for your souls." I'm going to keep going. He's coming back the third time. That's nuts.

Speaking of December 25th, let's go back to December 24th, where I get to see this up close. I mean, I know most of you just come for one of the services here. We have a bunch of services here. Have you noticed that? They go on ad infinitum. We start them at six in the morning. At least it feels that way. We have them every hour and a half. Now I watch the facilities team, I watch the tech team, I watch the worship team. I watch us all do our thing and all the support teams, everybody. The parking lot, ushers, everybody. We're all doing this thing over and over. And everyone, at least between the second and third service and the third and fourth service, there's a lot of I'm spent. And you know what I've yet to see? Any of you going, I'm done. No one when they say I'm spent in those contexts; the equal sign is never I'm done. It's just a statement. Because the thing that charges us up, at least I know what charges me up, is to walk out in the lobby and chat with people, either coming out of the service or going into the next service, we're very excited to be recipients of what we're doing and to say that's what we're here for. And then add that to most of us have to go to the final "service" of the day because our families have some weird thing going on. It happens to be at my house, and we have to do that whole thing with all the in-laws. I wish it were somewhere else but it's at my house. And we do it even though we're spent. Love drives that. And we do it for people, right? It doesn't mean I'm done. Sometimes we run on fumes and you just have to be ready for that. Regardless of what comes we keep going.

One last thing. I don't want to make much of this, but it's certainly true. Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verses 16 through 18. He's saying, okay, even if you grant the fact that I wasn't taking money from you, some of you apparently, here's a new accusation that is kind of here by inference. They were saying maybe you're just collecting this money for the thing in Jerusalem, at least you said that in Chapters 8 and 9. But really, what you were doing when you collected all that money from Titus and the brother that everybody respected, I think you were dipping into that, Paul. So really, what you did with all that big offering that you asked for, what you're really doing, that's where you're getting your money. So this whole thing here is an accusation that his famine relief money offering was really his way to get into their pockets. And he's countering that. That's not true. Granted that I myself didn't burden you, right? Was I "crafty, you say," is that what people are saying? That "I got the better of you by deceit," I was lying to you. "Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you." Is that what happened? And "I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?" Weren't we doing...? Come on.

And in doing this he's not just proving that Titus and the other brother were honest. He's proving that the people closest to him were the same self-sacrificing people that he was. The people closest to Paul shared Paul's servant attitude. I wonder about your closest friends because that makes a big difference. Maybe you've quoted, if you've raised teenagers, you've quoted Proverbs 13:20. He who "walks with wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools



will suffer harm." That's a good one for you to quote to yourself. Who are your closest friends? And let me just ask you this about your closest friends. Are they pulling you toward more self-sacrificial service and love? Or like Mary and Jesus' brothers, are they going, oh come on man, self-preserve. You need some me time. Are they pulling you toward more self-insulation?

Number three, "Team with Sacrificial Servants." You need more sacrificial servants in your life. And you need to make those your closest friends. I mean, look at Daniel: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, aka Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It's great to see Daniel have people around him who shared the same convictions that he did. You need that. Make sure the people closest to you have that same conviction. They're not greedy. They're not selfish. They're sacrificial. That's so important. Matthew 6:22 and 23 talks about your eye. It's not an ophthalmology verse, but the idea of how you see the world, "if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light." If your eye is bad, the whole body is full of darkness. Right? Now, that's a metaphor. That's an illustration.

And it's going to the next verse. The third verse in that discussion is verse 24, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." And the preceding two verses are about this: how you see the world. Do you see it as an opportunity for gain or do you see it properly? If you want your body full of light, so to speak, this is the analogy. You have to see it in the right way, which is people in your life are not for your advantage, they're for you, just like the Apostle Paul as he says, I don't want to get in your pocket. Think about what he says, "I don't seek what's yours." This isn't about me. I'm not selectively serving people. I don't want to serve people who are going to make me look good. I'm not trying to serve people so I can get something out of them. I'm not serving because I'm greedy or selfish. I'm serving because I love God.

I hope you have friends who love to serve. They're not prideful. They're not self-promoting. Here's a homework assignment for you. It's not on the worksheet, although I did dip into it on your discussion questions if you happen to be in your small group this week. Even if not, use those five questions as devotionals every week would be great. But on the back of your worksheet I do at least reference Prisca and Aquila elsewhere known in Scripture as Priscilla and Aquila. In that though, here's the homework assignment, Romans Chapter 16. This is the magnum opus of the Apostle Paul in terms of his letters, but at the end of it he adds this very personal chapter of all these names. At the beginning close to 30 names of people who he references. Here are his friends, his companions, and his team, if you will. At the end, eight traveling companions that he lists. About a third of them are women. Right? So he's branching into all these people whom he loves, all these people he's concerned about, all the people who are partners in ministry with him.

Please know this. The people whom he praises the most are not people who are the most theologically astute, the best articulate preachers. Do you know the people whom he praises the most and it's seen by the repetition of this Greek vocabulary word? The word that is used four times throughout this list is the word for hard work, toil, exhausting labor. This one word



used over and over and over again just interlaced throughout these names is people who have labored, they've worked. And then I love the fact that the translation here in the one passage I teased out of this text for us to think about is when Prisca and Aquila, it says in Romans Chapter 16 verses 3 and 4, risked their necks for the Apostle Paul. They "risked their necks for my life." It's always going to feel that way.

Self-preserving people will never risk their necks for ministry. And if you surround yourself with self-preserving people they will withdraw, they will withhold, they will build walls, they'll try to get you into their fortress, keep you away from any risks. But biblically strong people, that's what you have in Romans Chapter 16. Biblically strong people. And Paul goes these are my friends. This is my team. He who "walks with the wise will be wise." People who are biblically strong are going to spend. They're going to be expended. They're going to engage. They're going to endure. They're going to sacrifice. Usually in some sermons, like an evangelistic sermon, there are two clear categories, right? You're a non-Christian. You need to repent and put your trust in Christ and you become a Christian. You're over here. You need to be over here. There are a lot of sermons like that. You're not doing this. You need to do this.

This sermon is a little different because for all of us there are tendencies and parts of our character that are self-preserving. And I think there's nobody in the room who is going to say, well, there's nothing in my life where I feel like I'm taking a risk. You're taking risks in some relationships. But I'm hoping for at least as you leave the auditorium is that we're going to push the needle a little bit more in the direction of what can I do that's going to push me a little bit more to say I'm going to be a little less risk-adverse. I'm going to be a little less isolated, a little less insulated, and a little less cocooned in my little personal world that seems safe. I'm going to talk to people who I wouldn't normally talk to. I'm going to engage in a ministry I wouldn't normally engage in. I'm going to sign up for something I wouldn't normally sign up for. I'm going to care in areas I just before would kind of look down at the floor and walk past. Let's push the needle in the right direction because you'll go from weakness to strength. That's what this series is all about.

If I could put a gauge over everybody's head in this room and see the needle, and on one end, it's self-preservation, on the other end it's biblical strength. And underneath that are the words "biblical love." Just wonder where the needle would be over everybody's head. Because however that would read it really makes up the temperature of the church. And in a church where we're committed to sound doctrine, I can't change the doctrine. We're going to have to teach the truth, and the world's not going to like the truth. The Bible says we're supposed to speak the truth in love. And if we're going to be faithful to the Word of God, where the truth is always going to offend, we better have a church where the needle is pushing toward real love, people who are all about that, sacrificial service. If we don't have that then we're in trouble. We don't want people to see our love grow cold. The world's love is going to grow cold. This is the warm place. It should be. They should walk through the doors and go this is different. The world is going to get colder. Look at your news feed. It's getting colder. Let's make sure the temperature in this church continues to warm up.



Let's pray. God, in our world we have many challenges. And today we just want to make sure we're pushing and leaning, shifting, sliding over, making a few steps in the direction that your Spirit would want us to go. That you would empower us. You would direct us, you'd convict us, and you would give us the wherewithal this morning to leave here with a resolute commitment to say we're going to do what you called us to do. We're going to be more like the Apostle Paul. Loving and sacrificing, expecting a whole lot less coming back. Matter of fact, if we could be sons of the Most High, that'd be great, expecting nothing in return. Giving. Serving. I know what people say. If I serve and don't care what I get back from the people I'm serving then who's going to take care of me? Well, that's a great question that we all know the answer to. You say it over and over again. We can serve because you promise to take care of us. You promise to reward us. You promise to be so close to those who are close to your agenda, who reflect your virtues, who engage in your ministry. So, God, just let us all push the needle in the right direction so that our church may warm up as it relates to real, loving, sacrificial ministry.

In Jesus' name. Amen.