

Grab your Bibles and turn with me to Romans 8. We will get to Colossians 3, but I need to set some things up first. For the last two weeks, we've been talking about this idea of grace driven effort and putting sin to death in our lives and using the gospel to do that rather than just our own efforts to do that. The problem with our own efforts outside of the gospel is to beat sin, the only thing you have to pit against it is sin. And when sin fights sin, sin wins and you lose. So if you fight your fears and anxieties with manipulation and control, you're not free; you're just walking in a different kind of sin, a sin that you have deemed more acceptable. So we've been talking about it on the negative side of things, on the mortification side of things. We've been talking about how to use grace to put to death indwelling or residual sin in our lives. And now, Colossians 3 is going to take a turn, and it's going to go to what theologians call "vivification" or how to pursue or chase after or mature in godliness. You cannot put to death sin in your life, you cannot take off what is wicked without putting on what is righteous. And as a general rule, particularly for you young guys, if your only skill set is tearing down, in the end, everybody ends up homeless. If your only skill set is to look around and see what's wrong and you have no ideas how to move towards what is right, I think you just might have a worthless skill set. You being able to point out what's wrong isn't a win for anyone. We all just end up naked.

But let's go to Romans 8. I want you to see that there are three kinds of streams that we need to look at before we get to Colossians 3. Because in Colossians 3, I want you to watch these three things interact with one another and show you how they produce godliness or Christian maturity on the fastest scale that you can get onto. So let's look at Romans 8, starting in verse 31. We're going to talk about three streams that, when they come together, really produce godliness and help us not only grow into Him, but put sin to death more quickly in our lives. Verse 31, "What then shall we say to these things?" "These things" are simply that there is no condemnation for us and that God has saved us. "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." So Christ now is at the right hand of God, interceding for you and me. So we are being prayed for in this moment by Christ Himself to God the Father. Let's keep going. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." One of my favorite aspects of Romans 8 is it just does not mince words on the difficulty that you'll experience in life regardless of whether or not you're a believer. And he wasn't trying to hide anything right there. We are sheep to be slaughtered. I don't know what you do with that, Mr. Houston. Verse 37, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." So it's not that we don't experience those things; it's simply that we are more than conquerors when it comes to those things because of the love of Christ that's in us. Let's keep going. "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers [demons], nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Here is stream number one. Here is a piece that you've got to understand if you ever are going to seriously pursue and chase and feel safe in God Almighty. It's a simple truth. You've sung about it if you've had a church background since you were a kid. It's honestly the deepest waters in the Scriptures. It's the hardest theology to get your mind around. Are you ready for it? He loves you. He is for you. One of the greatest theologians in the last century, upon his death bed, Warfield was asked, "What was the greatest truth?" He had written volumes of commentaries. He was asked, "What is the greatest

truth you have found, that you have written on, that you have dwelt upon, that you have thought of in this life that had such great works?" And he said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It's just a simple truth. He loves you. He is for you. And that's why it says, "If God is for us, what could be against us?"

And then he goes on. You've got to follow the argument. So if God is for you, what charge could be made against you? That you're a sinner? Yeah, but Christ died for that sin and further was raised. So what condemnation can befall you? Which rolls back to the beginning of the chapter. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Why? Because they're loved by God. And this is proven in Christ. If you don't get that He loves you, if you don't understand that He has an affectionate love for you, then on those days where you struggle, on those days when the Accuser or your own voice calls you worthless, calls you a screw up, calls you a failure, calls you unlovely, when you don't understand that He loves you and that love is built upon Christ and not you, then I don't know that you'll ever really run towards Him. You will constantly be trying to pretty yourself up. But you're just putting lipstick on a pig. I've said this before, but I'm not anti makeup. If the house needs painting, paint the house. But in the end, if you put lipstick on a pig, it's still a pig, wearing lipstick, which is kind of creepy. So it's not that we're not sinful. We're absolutely sinful. It's not that we're not wretched. We're absolutely wretched. That's what makes God's love for us even more spectacular.

Let me show it to you in one more place. Look at Hebrews 12, starting in verse 1. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the [author] and perfecter of our faith. . ." Now let me tell you why those two things are so important. He is the Author in that He started it and the Perfecter in that He sustains it. Now the next line is the one that always blew my mind. It says, ". . .who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Now I don't know how aware you are of the cross and how that works and what that is, but you would be hard pressed to find any joy in it. Christ is arrested in the middle of the night and betrayed by one of His own. Judas Iscariot walks up and kisses Him on the face to identify Him. And Jesus says, "You betray the Son of man with a kiss?" Translation: "You? You're betraying Me? You've been with Me these three years, you've seen all that I've done, you've heard My teaching, You Judas, one of My boys?" When Hebrews says that He experienced all that you could experience so that you would have an empathetic high priest, if you've ever been betrayed by someone close to you, Jesus knows. He's been there. He is kissed, they immediately arrest Him, begin to beat Him and endures six trials, three of which were illegal according to the Law itself. You couldn't try anybody by night, but three of His six trials occurred at night. At each one of those trials, He is beaten severely. The Bible says that they slapped Him, they spat upon Him, they mocked Him, they grabbed His beard and yanked it out of His face, they blindfolded Him and punched Him saying, "Prophecy who hit you." They crushed thorns down on His head, gave Him a staff and said, "Hail, King of the Jews," they took the staff from Him and began to beat Him with it. In this kind of mob-like violence, they just belittled, mocked, beat and stripped Him naked and gambled for His garments. And then Pilate, knowing that He was innocent, had his wife come to him after having a dream and said, "Have nothing to do with this man." And so Pilate starts waking up to the fact that here they are, about to kill a man of whom his wife says, "Have nothing to do with this man." So he gives the Jews a chance. "Do you want Him or do you want Barabbas?" This is the same crowd who just four days earlier was screaming, "Hosanna! You're the King! Hosanna! You're the King!" Just for the record, they were worshiping the miracles He had done, not Him. There is a difference between worshiping Him and worshiping the miracles that He does. One is idolatry and one is saving faith. We celebrate Christ because we get Christ, not because He gives us stuff, despite the fact that He does give us stuff. On with the story. Pilate, not wanting to kill Jesus, decides that if he can beat Him severely enough, he can present Him to the crowd so messed up and so beaten up that it would move their hearts to compassion and he could somehow get out of this scenario. So they tie Him to a pole, take a whip that is filled with rocks and glass and has hooks on the end, so as they hit you, it would wrap around your front and grab hold of the flesh in the front. And then they didn't let it fall; they would pull it and rip strips of skin off your back. So they just fillet the Son of God in a rage. So then they put another robe on Him and present Him to the

crowd, just completely beaten to smithereens. And he gives the Jews the option. "Do you want the murderer or do you want Christ?" And the crowd once again says, "Give us Barabbas. Give us the murderer. Give us the thief." "What shall I do with Jesus, who is the Messiah?" And the crowd goes insane crying out, "Kill Him. Crucify Him. Kill Him." And Pilate, a secular Roman governing official, is going, "We found no fault in Him." But at this point, the crowd has grown so hostile, so angry and so aggressive that Pilate feels he has no choice. He can either attack the crowd and handle this crowd or kill Jesus. For Him, I don't know that it's an easy decision, but He chooses killing the one vs. killing the many. And He asks for a basin of water and washes his hands, and he says, "His blood is on you." And in a bit of prophecy I don't believe they understood was prophetic, they scream out, "May His blood be on us and on our children." So then Jesus is so severely beaten at this point that they lay the cross beam on Him, He takes a couple of steps and collapses. So they have to pull Simon out of the crowd. Just for those who doubt whether or not the Scriptures are legitimate, Paul is later going to reference Simon's son as an eye witness to these things. He's going to say, "Simon's son was there. It was his dad that actually carried the cross for Jesus." So Jesus is so severely beaten that Simon is pulled from the crowd and carries the cross beam to the cross. They then lay down Jesus on the cross and drive nails through His hands and feet. Now here's how you die on the cross. Because of the beating, the position of the body and you hanging, your lungs begin to fill with blood and you asphyxiate over an extended period of time. You drown in your own blood, that's how you die on the cross. Men would breathe on the cross by pushing up on the nail driven between their feet, gasp and then collapse, push up, breathe and then collapse. Which is why by the sixth hour, if you haven't died, the Romans would come up with a club and shatter your shin bones so you could no longer push up and you'd be forced to drown in your blood and die, so they could go on about their way. While He is hanging there on the cross, the lowest class of humanity imaginable comes out and they mock Him and spit on Him. He's hanging there naked and the who's who of morons are hurling insults at Him and they're gambling for His clothes. By the way, all of this mirrors completely Psalm 22, which begins, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Does that sound familiar? Jesus is going to cry out on the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" It's a reference to Psalm 22 that's going to talk about hands and feet being pierced, the gambling of garments. Psalm 22 is a Messianic prophecy about the way by which Christ would die. Now, He hangs there until He. Just to make sure He's dead, they take a spear and run it under his ribcage, puncturing His lungs and his heart sac and blood and water flows, and that's how they know He's dead.

So there it is in as much detail as I could give. In the end though, the Scriptures say, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." So here's what you've got to do if you're a serious thinker. What is the joy set before Christ in the cross? That He was purchasing for His Father many sons and daughters. You and I, in this strange way, become the joy that is set before Christ on the cross. He is, by His wrath-absorbing sacrifice on the cross, purchasing for the Father many sons, many daughters. It was with joy that He endures all of this. Why? Because He loves you. That's why. You have to grasp this truth (and it's a big one) that He loves you. Not only does He love you, but He knows. You see, that's the thing that makes it hard to believe. We've got this weird compartmentalization thing that happens where you don't think that God sees all that you are. Or we think that if He could have known who you were going to be, He wouldn't have gone to the cross. Listen, God knew you were going to be messy. Christ knew that you were going to be messy. God knows that you're going to screw up often. He knows that you're going to be drawn to things that are wicked. He knows. That's what the cross is all about. The whole point of the cross is that you're going to fail, you're going to stumble and you're going to feel dirty. The whole point of the cross of Christ is there be this mighty picture of His love and pursuit of you despite you. So the cross is necessary because of you, but it's also the picture we have of just how far God is willing to go because He loves you. So stream one, if you're ever going to grow into the maturity of Christian faith, you have to understand God's deep and abounding love for you. And there are tons of other texts that we could go to, ones that call you the apple of His eye, ones that talk about His dancing at the thought of you.

So this idea of God's love for us, according to the Scriptures, should create two things. It should create repentance, and it should create gratitude that we are loved by God. And we are loved by God today. It's not you when you get everything

straightened out that God loves. It's you now. It's not some future version of you that God has affection for. He loves you now. And the reason He's able and willing to love us even now can be seen in children. Let me just be honest. Sometimes my children get on my nerves. I'm just going to throw that out there. Sometimes I'm just like, "This has got to be from your mother's side of the family. I don't understand this." But here's what I know. My one-year-old, Nora is still in diapers, like most one-year-olds are. When I have to change her diaper, I'm just like, "Oh, I hate this kid." I know that there is a day coming where I'm not cleaning up her mess anymore. I know there is a day coming where I don't have to do this. I know there is a day coming where the difficulties present, whether that be in a seven-year-old, a four-year-old or a one-year-old, there is going to be this day where those things aren't present. And since God is outside of time and has purchased you with the blood of Christ and His love for you in Christ has made you holy and blameless before Him, does He not see you in that perfected state? So even your screw ups and trials now are simply a growing process, like a junior high boy whose voice is cracking. You're not stuck there. He knows. He sees. To grasp the love of God for us is the most profound thing we could grasp in regards to spiritual growth. The more you doubt it and the more you don't understand it, the less apt you'll be to truly pursue and run after the Lord. That's stream number one.

Here's stream number two. Stream number two is what I'll just call gospel community. Let me read you a couple of verses. Before I give them to you, let me say this. It was not the plan of God in the Scriptures at any point to create a person, to save a person. He has created and is saving a people. So Christ ascends, the Holy Spirit falls, Peter goes out and gives one of the most aggressive mean sermons in the history of mankind. "This Jesus whom you crucified. . ." It is not seeker friendly, it is not Kumbaya, there were no songs before or after. He simply says, "You killed Jesus. You're going to be damned for it unless you repent. It is just as strong as you can get. You can read it in Acts 2. Now at the end of Acts 2, look at what happened. Acts 2:42-47 says this. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." So God creates not a series of individuals, but He creates a community founded on and sustained by the gospel of Jesus Christ. We rejoice with one another when there are times of rejoicing and we mourn with one another when there are times of mourning, and where anyone is in need, we fill the gap. Whether that is a felt need, an emotional need or a spiritual need, we are there for one another. It's gospel community. The second verse I'll read you is 2 Thessalonians 5:11. "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up." That's this idea that the words of our mouth and the actions of our life should, within gospel community, reveal that we are other focused, that I am responsible for you and you are responsible for me. The question in Genesis 4 is, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes, you are. And then some of you are going, "Isn't that from New Jack City?" Yes, they're quoting the Bible in New Jack City. If you haven't seen that movie, please don't.

Titus 2:2-8 says, "Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us." And so he's beginning to build out what gospel community looks like. So listen to what he says. Older men, you have a responsibility to younger men. Older women, you have a responsibility for the younger women. Younger men, you have a responsibility to submit to and learn from older men. Younger women, you have a responsibility and a biblical command to submit to and find an older woman who will teach you the things of God.

Now here's what I have found. There are two errors. There is not one party who is responsible for the disconnect in the mingling of generations. The older generation sees any type of new thinking and any type of new way of doing things as some sort of assault on the way they did things. It's just that there are new tools and new ways of looking at things that are being looked at. In no way are they trying to illegitimize your experience; they're just simply trying it a new way. Sometimes they're right, sometimes they're wrong, but you have to at least give them some space to try that. So if somebody doesn't ever want to discipline their kids, they're going to pay for that. They're going to pay for it horribly. They're going to be stressed out of their mind and their kid's are going to be screaming and urinating on a grocery store aisle. So let them just kind of let the kid think about where he's been wrong. "That's bad. You think about that." Just because you beat them half to death and they turned out alright doesn't mean they're trying to say you were wrong for that as much as they're trying some New Age baloney that's not going to work. So it might be the most loving thing you can do just to let them fail miserably. But some things are right. Some things are better. It's not an indictment against you. There's also this thing that happens to older men and women when their kids leave the house. We experienced this a whole bunch several years ago, and it's gotten much better. What ends up happening is all the 50 and 60 year olds who come place like the Village that is a young church, they kind of just group up together. They talk about the glory days and how they raised their kids and how grateful they are that God has done this and this. And they kind of group up and I guess they just wait to die. Then on the other side of things, you've got young and brash men and women who think that nothing that occurred before them has any real value. It's like they're the first generation that has ever walked on planet Earth, and they don't need anyone to tell them how things work. If that's you, literally the book of Proverbs calls you a fool because you'll spill your own blood rather than learning from someone else's spilled blood. So congratulations, the Bible literally calls you a moron. It's not your name, but it says, "A fool in his heart behaves in such a way." And what they do is clump up together and then just feel overwhelmed. They clump up and go, "We just had our first baby. I haven't slept in eight weeks. Is it always going to be like this? If this is the rest of my life, I'm going to go out of my mind. I can't do it if this is the rest of my life." Meanwhile, everyone who knows that it's not the rest of their lives are sitting over here waiting to die. So the best thing that could happen in any gospel community is the biblical model of community, which is not all the generations being within their peers, walking in their ignorance, but rather a mingling of the generations for the good of both. So if you've got life experience here, the Scriptures say you have a biblical responsibility for the younger men and the younger women.

So how are you seeking this out and how are you walking in that? Part of it is the older men and women are outnumbered, but there is not a week that goes by that everyone on this staff isn't just slammed with request, "Do you know anybody who could disciple me? Do you know anyone who could encourage me?" Some of that has to do with spirituality. Listen, we're just a real fatherless generation. Certain guys don't know how to tie ties, they don't know how to cook steaks. They can only cook them well done. Can you imagine? Why would you buy a fillet and cook it well? Why would you just ruin that piece of meat? If you're going to burn it, just get a pork chop. So they don't know how to cook, don't know how to love their wives well, don't know how to love their children well. The only examples they had were either an absent father or an abusive father. I mean, there is just a real deep desire to be mentored, to be encouraged and to be pointed in the right direction when it comes to growing in godliness and loving your wife and family well. And we have a shortage of men who have the time or willingness or their own maturity to do such a thing. But the gospel community becomes this very powerful shaping force.

And now for the last piece before we get to Colossians 3. So you've got an understanding of God's love for you, you've got an understanding of gospel community and you also have an understanding of repentance, what it is and what it's not. Matthew 3:8 says, "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." It's an ongoing action. Now when we did The Path series in the Fall, you have this idea that repentance isn't this one-time act that ushers you into the kingdom of God, but it's an ongoing act that should be a part of all our lives as we interact with the Scriptures and with others and become aware of areas of our heart and life that aren't fully submitted to God. Repentance marks the life of a believer. 1 John goes so

far to say that if there is no repentance in you, you are a liar and the truth of God is not in you. If you don't know that, you fall short and are in need of the Holy Spirit's power and in need of God's work in your life to restore, to grow, to save and to deliver. You're lying to yourself and the truth is not in you. When you get home, read 1 John 1 and 2. It says it over and over again in those two chapters. If you ever just want to get punched in the spiritual guy, 1 John is your book. It's just an epic beat down of biblical proportions. It is, over and over again, "If you say there is no sin in you, you are a liar. . . If you say you have not sinned, you are a liar. . ." There is this idea of ongoing repentance.

Romans 2:4 says, "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" So now we're starting to see some of these streams intermingle. What is it that leads to repentance? It's an understanding of God's love. Or do you presume upon the forbearance of God? Here is simply what Romans 2 is asking. Do you make light of your own sin? Do you think your sin is no big deal? Small ones, big ones, whatever, do you feel that your sin is no big deal? So that's his question. And then 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." He's drawing a line between feeling bad about your behaviors and understanding that you've sinned against God and repenting.

So those are the three streams. Now let's flip over to Colossians 3 and finish out this section. Here we'll watch these three streams interact with one another in this text. We'll pick it up in verse 12 of Colossians 3. Now remember, where we've been the last couple of weeks is we've been putting off, taking off and putting to death in us. Now look at verse 12. "Put on then, as God's chosen ones. . ." And I'll preach this to the day I die, despite the fact that I know it brings a lot of arguments. But I feel like I have the Bible on my side. You did not choose God. God chose you. That's over and over and over again in the Scriptures. We are chosen by God in the same way God chose Abram to become Abraham. And just for the record, God chose an Iraqi to become the first Jew. Go look it up. Abram is from what is now known as Iraq. God calls him out of Iraq and says, "I'm going to make you a people," which becomes the people of Israel. I've always thought that was just wrought with irony. If you'll follow the story, it's actually Abraham's disobedience that creates Ishmael, and that's where we get a battle that is just not going to end until God ends all things. So we're God's chosen ones, and now we're going to see how He sees you. "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. . ." So God sees you two ways. He sees you as holy, perfect, spotless before Him, and then you are beloved by God. This goes back to this idea that God, despite you, has a great deal of affection for you. This is a profound truth in the Scriptures. Let's keep going. "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." So if we just stopped here and began to watch all the streams come together, what you see happening here is an understanding of God's love as that foundational component that you and I are called by God, we are seen by God as holy and we are beloved. And now we are interacting with one another in community with compassionate hearts. If you'll look at the list of what we are to put on, they are impossible to put on in private or isolation or simply as individuals. Whether or not compassion, mercy, love are there is revealed in community, not in isolation. This is the painful lesson every single man who lives by himself finds out when he gets married. Because he has been living by himself in his apartment and he thinks he's clean, he thinks he straightens up well and everybody likes him. He just can't fathom that there is going to be conflict in his future.

And then he gets married and now there is another soul living in the house, and what is revealed? He's nasty. So Lauren and I were on our way home from a wedding in Ennis, and we were talking about this. In college, I was living with three

other guys, and Lauren used to always come into my apartment and say, "It smells like boy in here." I never really knew what that meant until I got married, and now I know boy has a smell. But I had no clue that boy had a smell until I got married. Now that I'm married, I can walk into a place and go, "This smells like boy. Our apartment smelled like this?" I had no clue before I got married.

So what happens in gospel community is walking deeply together with one another reveals what's really there. Your ability to forgive is directly tied to your understanding of God forgiving you, God loving you. So when you are walking in community and unwilling to forgive others, you now have had it revealed to you that you don't trust in God's forgiveness for you. And now you have the opportunity to repent. So when you understand God's love for you and you're walking in deep community with one another, all of these things can begin to happen.

Now there's really a fourth stream that I haven't mentioned that is absolutely a necessity for you to understand and grasp all of this. It's for you to know what the Scriptures say and what the Scriptures command concerning our life together as gospel community and what we need to repent of and what requires repentance to begin with. Which takes us back to you knowing the Bible.

Now, where you are missing any of those streams, there becomes a breakdown in your sanctification, in your spiritual growth. Think about those not as streams but as nutrients. If you begin to have a deficiency in one of those areas, there is going to be some breakdown. If you're not walking in gospel community, then your sin is not going to become as easily spotted by you. A second layer of defense is the community around you should be going, "Hey bro, I'm worried about you in this area of your life." So I've had to have conversations with guys before who are just always capping on their wives. I have finally had to go, "Hey bro, is there something going on at the house? I know you're just being kind of sarcastic, but it gets to the point that where there is smoke, there might be fire. Is everything alright at home or are you just an idiot? You're getting nowhere always making a smart-alecky comment about your wife, whether in front of her or not in front of her." Now that's the second line of defense in gospel community, where you can be confronted about your sins. So if church for you is a spectator sport, if you just come to the arenas and watch, if I say something you don't like or we do a style of music you don't like or we confront you on your sin so you just go to the next place, well you have robbed yourself of vitality that God gave you for your own sanctification. You are robbing yourselves. If God doesn't want you here, I don't care at all if you're here or not. I left a crowd of 3,000 and came to a crowd of 168. I wasn't looking for a giant crowd. I was looking for depth, meaning and the pursuit of Christ wholeheartedly and to see what God might do in a place where we submitted to Him, pursued Him, chased Him and just let the Bible beat us up week after week and see what would happen over a forty year period of time if God would give that to me. So if you want to run to Fellowship, if you want to go to Watermark, if you want to go to Valley Creek, First Lewisville or wherever, you've got to have gospel community as a key nutrient in regards to your sanctification, you growing into maturity. You've got to understand that God loves you or, as you fall short, you're not going to run to Him. As you stumble, when those sins are pointed out as you do walk deeply with others, you're either going to blame them for them or you're going to run from God. If you don't get that God loves you, when it's time to repent, you're not going to repent. Because it's the understanding of the love of God that leads us to repentance. Do you see how these begin to intersect with one another?

You've got to have all these nutrients, and when you have all of them, you're in the fast lane of sanctification, which by the way is still a dirt path. No one gains godliness overnight. There is no magic silver bullet for that. There is no magic programs of six weeks and you walk on water. There's no, "Twelve week course, read these books, sit with me in the morning, memorize these Scriptures and you'll no longer need an alarm clock because Christ Himself will wake you up in the morning." There is no silver bullet to sanctification. It's why Paul uses language like, "Labor with me in prayer. . . Train yourself in godliness." And on and on it goes. It's a day at a time, gospel community, repentance and understanding of the love of God that pushes us into Him rather than away from Him. And where you are lacking any of

these, you have robbed yourself of the joy that transcends disease, death, sword, famine or nakedness, that love that would sustain you through any difficulty, through any sorrow, through any pain, that understanding that nothing could separate us constantly pushes us into Him.

So let's pray together, and I want to ask you a couple of questions in closing.

For some of you, the truth is you feel stagnant and stale in your relationship with Christ, and if we would just wrestle through some of these points, I wonder if we might find a solution to your staleness. Some of you just find it impossible to believe that God loves you, whether that was something that happened as a child, whether that is something you've actively been doing, whether that's a current state of your life, you just find it impossible to believe and grasp that God loves you, despite the fact that Jesus went to the cross in full knowledge of you before you were. So at some point in your life, you've got to figure out who the liar is, you or God. Now you can not like it that God loves you, but you can't change it that He does. So instead of fighting the affection of the One who made you, it might be the best thing in the world just to settle into it and find it to be unbelievable.

To this day there's this part of me that can't believe that, when I asked Lauren to spend the rest of her life with me, she said yes. I mean, that was just such a profound yes to me. It still kind of blows my mind that she would know me better than you know me, and still said, "I'm in. I'll do it. I'm not doing anything else for the next forty years. Let's do this." I love to settle into that truth often, as life has gotten difficult. So I get diagnosed with brain cancer. If that goes bad, I know how I die. It is not pretty. I basically lose parts of my brain over an extended period of time until I don't recognize anybody, until I don't know anybody, until finally it gets to the places that control my lungs and heart and then I die. And upon this news, my wife is unwavering in her commitment to me and her love for me and being steadfast by my side. I just want to snuggle into that love, and I want to make out with it (I'm not going to lie to you). And it might be the best thing you could ever do to just finally get on the table all the reasons you think God can't love you and have Him remind you of the cross. Just have a list of all the reasons He should not love you. Make that list and then let Him remind you of the cross. "Yeah, paid in full. . .paid in full. . .paid in full. . .paid in full. . .You're right, but I don't even see it anymore. Christ has covered that."

Some of you just have no real concept of gospel community. Church for you your entire life has been program driven, not relationship driven. And so you've gone from program to program to program in the hopes that it would produce godliness, but programs don't produce godliness. They create lanes by which you connect with other people. It's in connecting relationally with other people that iron sharpens iron and you get to rub against each other and clash. And listen, people are difficult. Christian people are difficult. They are. In fact, if I'm hanging out with too many Christians for too long, I start to go out of my mind. I just need some good old pagan. There is just a great deal of raw honesty among pagans. For some reason, in our Christian world, there tends to be this, "No, let's everybody be pretty," and nobody wants to go, "Hey, I love you enough to say this to you." It's wrongly defining Christian community. And some of you have never belonged anywhere; you just go to church. You rob yourself.

And the third is that most of us don't spend enough time in the Scriptures and don't spend enough time with other people and walk in community in such a way that our faults and shortcomings become evident to both us and those around us in such a way that we might repent and grow in godliness. Because every opportunity you get to repent is God wooing you closer to Himself. Every time a failure or fault is pointed out, you've just been invited in by God to take a step closer to Him, to be one more step in intimacy near Him. So where are you and what needs to change?

Let's pray. "Father, I thank You for these men and women. I thank You for their desire to know You and to hear from You. It is my earnest hope, Father, that You would reveal to them and open up in their hearts and minds where we have

chosen to grow in our relationship with You as we have decided we should and as we have defined that we should rather than submitting to Your plan and what You would have for us. So for those of us who just doubt Your love, I just pray that You would overwhelm all thoughts of that with Your cross. I pray for those who have never really belonged and never really put down roots in a place. I pray that You would help them to decide that, whether it be here or somewhere else, they would quit just attending and that they would sell out and say, 'I'm going to find a group of men and women to live deeply and honestly with.' I pray that You would grant us the courage to share our failures and not just our successes. Because that is where transformation really begins to take place, not when we share our wins but when we share our losses. And God, may we be a people marked by repentance. We need You. Help us. It's for Your beautiful name. Amen."

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