

“Therefore...How Are We to Live? Fear and Faith

Good morning! I'm going to warn you right off the bat that today I promise I will take you outside your comfort zone. In youth ministry, it is crucial to keep up with the ever changing culture around me. And these days it changes faster than ever. It pushes me outside of my comfort zone on a daily basis. Things like the bands that were just emerging as I was a child being played on the classic rock station, my impending 10 year high school reunion, and the fact that I find myself inadvertently using the phrase, “kids these days...” remind me that it takes active effort to move beyond what I'm used to, to grow and stay in tune with the present realities that make up teen life. And so I am going to start off by broadening our horizons and bringing us all in to 2013, which I understand to be painfully out of date already. For many of you, we are about to take your first selfie... #sermonselfie. #joestepintomyoffice.

With that being said, any time you see the word “fear” in a sermon title, be afraid. Not because I'm going to scare you, but because I am going to ask you to step outside of your comfort zone. I'm going to ask you to join me in leaving behind what we are comfortable with and stepping into a place where God is going to reach in, take hold of your life, and use its circumstances to transform you.

At this point in the service, I would like to excuse everyone who is perfect. If you're a perfect person, you are welcome to leave, because I don't have anything to say to you today. But for those of us who are painfully aware of how imperfect we are, who know that life far too often gives us things we don't know how to handle, for those of us who know that the kind of person we are and the kind of person we should be don't always line up, get comfortable... but not too comfortable.

Over the last 3 weeks we have been working our way through a series entitled “therefore... how are we to live?” This is a 5 week journey through Romans 8, highlighting 5 paradoxes of the faith along the way and exploring how we are to live at the intersection of the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God. When God's promises meet present realities, how do we deal? We started with Guilt & Grace- the great exchange of our sin for Christ's righteousness that took place on the Cross. Then Flesh & Spirit- exploring how in the midst of a fallen and broken world and sinful and imperfect lives, we can be transformed and set free by the Holy Spirit. And last week, Despair & Hope- living with hope when we are feeling like there is none.

And today we move on to verses 28-30 of Romans chapter 8. I want everyone here to grab a Bible from in front of you, follow along with your neighbor, parent, spouse, or that stranger next to you. I want everyone to have these verses in front of you. Read them along with me. (Read verses here) The paradox we find in these verses is this: we live at the intersection of apprehension of the unknown and assurance in God's plan. We live lives of both fear and faith.

The other day I walked in to the living room to find there was a Sharks game on. I was met immediately with dismay as I saw the Colorado Avalanche score not just one goal, but 2 within 12 seconds with a 1:28 left in the game to put them ahead 4 to 3. Now you avid sharks fans might be thinking to yourselves- the Sharks haven't played the Avs yet this season. Yes! I hadn't noticed the little “sharks classic” logo in the corner. I put my stellar deductive reasoning powers to work, taking inventory of the situation and realizing what was going on- I was watching a replay! And then more thinking, nobody refers to a Sharks game where the good guys blow it in the last minute to lose as a classic. Hey man, remember that game where the Sharks blew it in the last minute of the game to lose? That was classic! so somehow we must pull it off. My distress turned to excitement and anticipation, not because I knew exactly what was going to happen, but I did know how it was going to end. The Sharks went on to score with just a few seconds left, and then pulled through to a shoot-out win. The excitement was there, but the fear was gone. I knew how it worked out in the end. My fear was alleviated because I had been given a glimpse of the outcome.

Our lives are often lived in fear. Fear of the unknown, fear on the news, fear of what our kids are doing, fear of what our friends really think of us, fear of the future. Why is it so easy for our lives to be dictated by fear rather than by faith? Before we can have this discussion we need to address something that we often take for granted- what is “good”?

We are reminded here that God can work through all circumstances for the good of those who love him. That in feast or famine, God can work for the good. So the first question we have to ask is really, what is good? We tend to take this as a given, thinking that it is obvious and so why debate it? Because what our view of good is will determine what we understand God to be doing in our lives!

We are bombarded with competing standards of what is good. Tim Keller defines culture as the collective expression of what is good, right, true, beautiful and just. It is defined by our cultural artifacts- art, stories, tools, architecture and much more. So Where can we look to find what is good? Let's look to TV. We see a parade of superstars. George Clooney's 1.6 million dollar wedding. "how to look rich on the cheap" "how to get rich quick?" "America's next top... whatever", luxury car pitches. Affluence, wealth and fame are glorified. Those things must be good. But when we look to life to give us those things, so often we are disappointed. Does God really want the good for me? If he does then why aren't I more successful, why don't I make more money... why don't I make enough? Perhaps because these are this world's pitch for goodness, but not God's.

Maybe instead we can look somewhere else for what "good" is. Let's look to music. On the iTunes music charts 3 of the top 5 selling songs are about sex, one is about getting over a bad relationship, and the other is about using sex to get over a bad relationship. Subtle. Things like status, power, safety, health, jobs and the list goes on. These are good. But my life doesn't seem to be giving me these things. Does God really work all things for the good? Or maybe I do have them, but that is so fragile. An accident, a bad investment, being laid off, or one little mistake and it all comes crashing down. We are taught to lament what we don't have and live in fear of losing what we do.

Culture gives us promises of goodness, and says that we will be happy when we get them. Often happiness is sold to us as good. Whatever makes me happy in the moment must be good. Maybe you have heard the song, "clap your hands if you feel like happiness is the truth." The truth is defined as whatever makes me feel happy. And maybe you have realized that instant happiness does not necessarily lead to lasting contentment. The high is followed by the hangover and we are still left asking, "what is good?"

What seems good for me may hurt those I love, or hurt those that God loves. The pursuit of money has not led to all being provided for, but to a vast chasm between the haves and have nots. The pursuit of sex has not led to healthy relationships, but to high divorce rates, broken families, single parents, and the loss of extended family. The pursuit of fame has not led to everyone being appreciated for who they are, but for the glorification and worship and things that draw attention- no press is bad press.

Romans 8 doesn't just tell us not that God can work this mysterious "good" in all circumstances, but he tells us what it is and that "good" is the plan for our lives. This good is the destination set by God for your life. Our culture has one idea of good, but God has another. In God's plan, being formed into the image of Christ is this "good" that we have heard of. And in God's economy, our life experiences, if invested wisely, will pay big dividends as we see our character transformed more and more into the character of Christ! And that is truly good. That leads to a contentment that is deeper than the fleeting peaks and valleys of happiness and frustration. It is the committed relationship of love that God has for us, that grows deeper as we experience the ups and downs of life together. And the result is that as Christ's likeness is formed more and more in the lives of his people, the good in the world grows. A good tree bears good fruit, and as we grow through the seasons into strong trees as individuals and expansive orchards as the Church, we produce an abundance of good fruit!

God's good plan for us is to use the circumstances of life- victories and defeats, strengths and weaknesses- to form Christ's image in you. In this one, hindsight is 20-20, but we can be spiritually farsighted. The things that are long in the past seem so clear. Can you think of an experience in your life where a negative circumstance turned out to make you a better person than you were before? God was at work there. But the present realities can be a bit blurry and unfocused. I remember being in nights of my life that I thought would never end, only to be able to say that I would not trade that experience for anything because of the work God did in me through it. God wants us to be refined in the fire, not burnt by it.

With all that being said, let's take a step out of our comfort zone. How's life going for you right now? Honestly. Is it great? Do all of the ducks seem to be falling in a row and it couldn't be better? How is God trying to use that circumstance to form the character of Jesus in you?

Is life hard? Are you dealing with things that no one knows about? Are family struggles, illness, unemployment, stress or anxiety putting you in a pit so deep that you can't see the top? It's at the bottom of the pit that we find the gold. How is God trying to use that circumstance to form the character of Christ in you?

The difference is all in fear and faith. Are we asking “what are you doing in me?” or “why are you doing this to me?” When we have faith in the outcome, we don’t have to fear the process. When we have faith in the destination, we don’t have to fear the journey, no matter how rocky it may be.

So take a moment and pray, “God, how are you using this circumstance to make me more like Jesus?” What is He telling you? What are you going to do about it? God wants to use your present realities to make you more and more like Jesus. Where do you know for sure you’re not like Jesus? That’s a great place to start.

The next step is to talk to someone about it- don’t keep it to yourself! Be proactive and accountable about your spiritual growth. If you know someone in your life whose faith you look up to, talk to them. Ask them to tell you about their faith. Do it right now after church if they are here. Call them up for coffee. Don’t let this opportunity fall into the category of great opportunities you never acted on.

That is the heart of discipleship. It is the culture of spurring one another on to grow in the character of Christ. It is learning from those who are more like Jesus than we are, how we can be more like Jesus. Pray with them, keep that conversation going.

When we live lives by faith, we don’t have to fear, because no matter where life takes us, we know where God’s destination for us truly is. “for those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, the he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called, and those he called he also justified, and those he justified, he also glorified.” So where is the destination? It is sharing in the glory of Christ. So now we are at a fork in the road. One way is taken in fear, the other in faith. You know where God is leading you. So will you get there by faith, or by fear? Pray with me, “God, give us faith.” Amen