

SEMINARY CELEBRATION

SERMON
OUTLINE



THE PROMISE OF CHRIST FOR ALL
GENERATIONS



WORKING FOR JOY

2 CORINTHIANS 1:23-24

SERMON OUTLINE

A movie came out several years ago with Jack Nicholson called “The Bucket List.” In the movie, the two main characters discover they have a limited time to live. Facing their own mortality, they jot down all the things they want to do before they “kick the bucket.” They go on an around-the-world vacation skydiving together. They drive a Shelby Mustang, fly over the North Pole, eat dinner at Chevre d’or in France, visit and praise the beauty and history of the Taj Mahal, ride motorcycles on the Great Wall of China, attend a lion safari in Africa, and visit the base of Mt. Everest in Nepal. The movie shows what life can be like when you find joy in your life, even in the face of death.

The movie poses the question: where is your joy in life? What is your life’s ambition?

Some of you may not have an answer. You may not know what you really want out of life. Maybe you never had a plan. Or perhaps you set goals at one time, but for whatever reason they now seem unimportant or unattainable.

Others have had career and life goals set since childhood. When the question is asked, “What is your life’s ambition?” they already know the answer: Make a good income. Be successful. Get good grades. Be a good parent.

Where is your joy in life? What is your life’s ambition?

I doubt Paul ever made a “bucket list.” In 2 Cor. 1:23-24, he does, however, lay out his life’s ambition. Listen carefully to his words. The challenge is not only to hear his apostolic ambition but also to share it, to let his goal be our goal:

I call God to witness against me – it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

Did you hear it? Did you hear Paul's apostolic ambition? "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith."

On the face of it, Paul's ministry to the Corinthians was not joyful but rather full of stress and pain. Paul was slandered by spiteful, false teachers ("deceitful workmen" he calls them). They misinterpreted his letters, twisted his teaching and charged him with being uncaring and unreliable. In verse 23, Paul says that he had delayed his coming to Corinth, a congregation he loved, because he knew that his visit would turn into a painful one — painful for them and him. He had to simply hope that through his letters and prayers, the situation — the hearts and minds of the Corinthians Christians — would be changed so that he could come with blessing.

Many of us have heard, "When you're angry, count to 10 before you speak; if very angry, 100." Sometimes we just want to yell. Maybe a family member or a friend messed up, and we want to set them straight. Start counting. Maybe we got chewed out at work and we want to get even. Start counting. We feel powerful when we set someone straight. Start counting.

In verse 24, you can almost hear Paul counting. He wants to set them straight about the Gospel and his ministry, but he doesn't chew them out or get even. Rather, he simply reminds those Corinthian Christians why he does what he does as an apostle. He reminds them that he doesn't do it out of callousness or heartlessness, pride or arrogance. He says, "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith."

Paul's ambition is this: to be a fellow worker, a helper, for their joy. His goal is not to exalt himself or call attention to his own authority or serve his own reputation. What talents and powers he has — and they are considerable — were simply ministerial, to assist the growth of the Christian life within them. He doesn't place himself between them and their God, as a channel or a mediator. No. His goal is to work alongside them and do whatever he can to increase their joy, to be the servant of their happiness.

Paul says just a few verses later: "I wrote as I did, [that is, a very harsh letter] so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all." Did you catch that? "My joy would be your joy."

This joy is not a whistle-while-you-work kind of joy. This joy doesn't come from pleasure, money, a 401(k), sex, 15 minutes of fame or education. This is the joy that comes from faith. Note how Paul uses the two words almost interchangeably: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with

you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.” There it is: faith and joy: faith at the front, faith at the back with joy in the middle. This is a real joy. This kind of joy, Paul says in Galatians, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. This is the joy of the woman or man redeemed and sanctified in Christ.

Another important note about working for their joy is this: it is costly. Later in 2 Corinthians, Paul makes a list. It is not a bucket list but a litany of the downsides of his ministry. It is a list of all that he suffered in the line of duty:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the 40 lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Paul’s life’s ambition — working for their joy of faith — is costing Paul his life. He is laying down his life for the joy of God’s people.

Some of you may have heard of Dr. Kent Brantly. Brantly partnered with Samaritan’s Purse, a Christian international relief organization in Liberia. Brantly made world news by being the first person with the Ebola virus on U.S. soil.

Face-to-face with his own mortality, this husband and father found out there was an experimental treatment being flown in to treat him and his colleague. But once the medicine got there, they discovered that there was only enough for one person.

Brantly offered it to his colleague.

He said that as he thought about his decision, he was reminded of the three Hebrew boys standing before the king of Babylon. The King, Nebuchadnezzar, commanded the boys to worship idols or face the fiery furnace. Brantly remembered how they had the chance to opt for safety and security, but instead of taking it, they told the King “We know our God is able to save us from this fiery furnace ... But even if He does not ...”

Who says that kind of thing in that moment? Well, someone who is a worker for joy, someone who lays down his life for the joy of others, someone whose joy comes for the joy of others.

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis strives to prepare its students to work together with the congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and their people to work for the joy of the world through Word and Sacrament ministry. For more than 175 years, Concordia Seminary has prepared thousands of men and women to serve all over the world, working to bring the joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to our troubled and pain-filled world.

I remember one Sunday, the cup had been poured for Communion, and I stood behind the Lord's Table with my arms outstretched to pray the prayer of thanksgiving. "Look, Mommy," one our younger members exclaimed. "He's trying to look like Jesus on the cross." It's not a bad goal or ambition, is it? Looking like Christ, proclaiming the love and joy of God in Christ day by day, week after week. For those of you who have worked together with Concordia Seminary for this joy of faith through your support, for your interest in its work, your prayers on the Seminary's behalf and your donations – thank you!

If you see young men or women in our congregation who have gifts for ministry, tell them. Encourage them. Plant that apostolic ambition. If you are one of those young men or women, consider how God might use you as one of His public ministers of the Gospel. It is not just pastors or deaconesses who are called to work together for the joy of faith. It is often the unheralded but deeply faithful laypeople who step up and work for the joy of faith one moment at a time, one act of love at a time, one prayer at a time, one Sunday school lesson taught at a time, one word of forgiveness at a time, one offering at a time. Every second, every minute, every hour, every day, spent working for the joy of faith is one less we have left for our selfish and sinful ambitions. We are laying down our lives, working together for each other's joy.

Jesus promises us as we continue to lay down our lives for the joy of faith, we will find we are not alone. We not only have one another but we also have another fellow worker — the Helper — who, the writer of Hebrews says, "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" (Heb. 12:2). And what was the joy set before Christ? It was the joy of bringing you and me to heavenly glory by way of His cross and His resurrection. It is the joy of bringing us into closer fellowship with Him through His water, Word and Meal. "I am with you always," Jesus said, "to the end of the age."

When I ask you, "What is the shortest verse in the Bible?" I imagine you will think of John 11:35, "Jesus wept." Did you know there is a shorter verse? In the Greek, this shortest verse has three words, but another verse, 1 Thess. 5:16, has only two: "Rejoice evermore." Do you see a connection

between the two verses? Our joy flows from the suffering, death and resurrection of our Savior. Jesus wept and we rejoice evermore. And it goes on and on and on. His joy is my joy, is your joy, is your joy, is your joy ...

When you are asked where do you find your joy or what is your life's ambition, what do you say?

I am a fellow worker for the joy of others, a helper for the joy of faith, and I lay down my life for joy.

That answer is not likely to make many bucket lists. It is not easy. It is costly. Most importantly, it is true. As Christians we are helpers of joy. We are people for whom the Lord of Life has laid down His life for our joy. We are the people of the greatest gift ever given. We are people who work for joy of faith.

