



INTRO:

I wanna show you a picture...**(TEMP PIC)**...THIS is a screenshot, from my phone, of the local temperature on January 1st 2018. You say, “*why do I have this?*” I have this because that was the day - 8:13am there - that I, along with your own Matt King, decided to - yet again - jump into the ocean, as a part of Southie’s annual Polar Plunge. We’d done it before and oddly, have done it multiple times since, but 2018 was BY FAR the coldest year we’ve ever done it. Now here was the thing about it/I remember it like it was yesterday: 3 thoughts hit me in succession: **1.** This water is much colder than I imagined! **2.** I am much stupider than I imagined! And **3.** I’m gonna die because of BEING much stupider than I imagined!...Cuz the way it worked was, at the call of some dude, who’d appointed himself Polar Plunge President - mostly cuz he had his own bull-horn - we stripped down to swim trunks and socks, and on the count of 10, ran down the beach, as far into the water as we could, before diving head-first into the Bay. At which point, I can honestly tell you everything changed...I’ve never been in like a legitimate bar fight/certainly not a boxing match that didn’t include my younger brother, but what I felt in those moments had to’ve/I’m convinced approximated getting hit in the gut by an in-prime Mike Tyson - who fun-fact - scientists say could punch with force equal to a dorm fridge, full of beer, falling on you, from a second-story window.¹ THAT’S what that water felt like! To the point that when I got out, all I could do was just suck-in the “pure oxygen of the beach”...Just “breathe!” (MIMIC BREATHING)

If you were to replace “pure oxygen” with grace of the gospel, and “breathing” with believing, you’d have the central rhythm of BOTH the Christian life AND a **life-giving** church!² The **life-giving** nature of church lies in believing and pointing folks to believe the grace of the gospel, that we need for life like we need oxygen...SO as we continue our **What Church Can Be** series through **2 Corinthians 5:11-21** today, I wanna show you 3 things respect to church being **life-giving**: **1. The Problem** we face; **2. The Solution**; And **3. An Application**. Problem, Solution, Application! But FIRST, let’s hear God’s word read! **(PAUSE RECORD)** **Elizabeth** reads...

TEXT:

You recall from last week, Paul is writing here to provide an extended defense of his *ministry*, in hopes of helping the church re-believe and live according to his *message*. Sadly and because of the influence of some false teachers, the church had begun to depart from the Gospel and subsequently from belief in Paul as a minister of the Gospel. And part of the reason for that/even though Paul’s **transparency** and **outwardly** shared both the Gospel and his life with them, is that, in contrast to these false teachers, Paul lacked...flash/flair! And he admitted as such. Earlier in **1 Corinthians 1:17**, he confessed that while Jesus had appointed him to preach the Gospel he didn’t (or couldn’t) do it with, as he said, “*eloquent words of wisdom.*” Later in **2 Corinthians 10:10** and **11:6**, he’ll admit to hearing the chatter about him as being “*unimpressive*” looking and though smart, unskilled as a speaker. AND a passage that always comforts me as a preacher is **Acts 20:9** in which we’re told that, Paul preached for so long that a young man named

¹ <https://www.sportscasting.com/heres-exactly-how-it-would-feel-to-get-punched-by-mike-tyson/>

² Introduction using my personal story adapted from story in *What Church Can Be: An Optimistic Vision With Some Blueprints* - Matthew Kruse - pp.10-11

Eutychus, not only fell asleep, but IN his sleep, fell down from the third story balcony from which he was sitting, and...died. Very comforting for me to know that whenever one of my sermons stinks/at least I haven't killed anyone...Needless to say, unlike these false teachers, Paul wasn't a guy with a lot of flash or flair. And YET, that's what the Corinthians had come to want: a flashier, more gifted, persuasive, relevant, even credentialed Pastor!...Which is WHY, you see in our focal passage today, Paul begins by saying, "*We're not commending ourselves to you again.*" Earlier in **2 Corinthians 3:1** he'd rhetorically asked the church, "*do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?*" by which he meant: "*You know me/you've seen my life. I shouldn't have to go through the ridiculous/self-serving pomp-and-circumstance of having someone recommend me to you because they think I'm a great speaker, or have a powerful testimony, and snappy attire.*" He'd reminded em, that THAT'S what these false teachers are doing - claiming superiority on the basis of things like speaking style and even Jewish status.³ And so Paul says, "*We're not commending ourselves to you again*" - *we don't roll like that and neither should you!* Rather, he says, "*WE boast about what's in the heart vs the outward appearance of things.*"...In other words, even 2000 years ago, Paul too operated in a culture, that like ours today, sadly prioritized style over substance, hype over heart, competency over character, and IN which personality, popularity and performance played!

And see, **First** here, THAT'S **The Problem** we face to church being **Life-Giving** - this emphasis on, as Paul says, "*outward appearances vs what's in the heart.*"...One of the, I'd say, underreported scandals of the last year, is the fact that Facebook/owners of Instagram, willfully pushed content WHILE knowing that the WAY in which they were pushing it, was degrading the mental health of teens, especially teenage girls; with 6% of teenage girls in the US and 13% in the UK saying that Instagram lead em to...wanna kill themselves. As one respondent to a 2500-person survey said, "*You can't ever win on social media... You just end up feeling worthless and crappy about yourself.*"⁴ And without wanting to trivialize that; in some senses, it makes sense right? Cuz social media you understand, by-and-large, is not just predicated on perception and performance - ya know, being able to put forth your highlight reel self, BUT in a kind of microcosmic way, it plays on something that's been suffocating us ever since Adam and Eve; namely, the belief that we ARE what we DO/or to use Paul's language: that "*outward appearance*" vs "*what's in the heart*" is most important. Ever since Adam and Eve sought happiness OUTSIDE of God rather than IN God, we've known nothing but nakedness, shame, and subsequent attempts to COVER our nakedness and shame by what we do and how we look!

As one of my favorite atheists Jean Paul Sartre said, "*inside every human heart, whether you believe in God or not, is a voice that whispers, 'not acceptable!' 'condemned!'*"⁵...It's that voice, you understand, that leads you to pretend, project, or just posture...ONLY TO FIND yourself

³ Insight on context from Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 647. + John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), 2 Co 5:12.)

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/sep/29/facebook-hearing-latest-children-impact>

⁵ Sartre quote adapted from citation in "What Went Wrong" // Genesis 3:1-19 // *The Whole Story* #3 - J.D. Greear

facing DISASTROUS consequences like/I'll just give you a few:⁶ **Hopeless Perfectionism**, ya know where you attempt to overcome your shame/insecurity through flawless performance/at your job, with friends, even just in your body image, BUT in doing so, you find it therefore, difficult to ever admit failure, cuz failure would confirm your shame...Or how bout **Harsh Criticism**, of yourself or others, when, ya know, you or they don't live up to some level of performance...Or how bout just **Helpless Feelings**, because you assume you never WILL live up to some level of performance... There's just no ability for environments predicated upon performance/works and "outward appearance" to be truly **life-giving**... And by the way, that includes church too: I remember June 2001 at 1:30am. That was the first time I ever breathed-in the fresh air of Jesus' grace. I'd spent years prior breathing-in, what can only be described as, the toxic fumes of trying to DO something in order to BECOME something - athletically, academically, all of it. But I remember someone sharing with me **Acts 1:8**, in which Jesus tells His disciples that HIS desire is that they be empowered by the Holy Spirit, in order to know and share His love and grace with everyone. And at 1:30am, God used that verse to open my eyes to the fact that MY life HAD no power. No matter how much I achieved, I wasn't gonna be able to pay for my sin/cover my shame or become somebody... YET at the very same time, Jesus could...and had!...I'll tell ya, it was like, God threw open the windows of heaven, so that after years of suffocating under the weight of sin and selfish-performance, I could breathe-in grace!... But here was the thing: Shortly thereafter, I was quickly disciplined into what, Pastor Matt Kruse calls, "*a culture of works, where it wasn't so much that I needed to earn my salvation by being a good person - I knew that wasn't true anymore - (But) that since salvation had been given to me, I had to toe-the-line to remain in God's 'good graces.'* That because Jesus had chosen me and died FOR me, I NOW had to work hard to prove He'd made a wise choice - pay Him back with obedience."⁷...Can I tell ya? That felt like being brought up outta that freezing cold Southie water...only to be plunged right back into it!...Cuz whenever performance, works, "outward appearances" drive, what COULD be **life-giving** becomes suffocating. That's **The Problem!**

So **Second, The Solution**: When Paul says he wants the church to "*boast about us so they can answer these false teachers, who, he says, only boast about outward appearance rather than what's in the heart;*" you have to understand: He isn't advocating for some kind of NT, therapeutic version of, ya know, "*we're all special and it's your inner beauty that counts.*" No! What he's doing is challenging the church to see that these false teachers, who're only concerned about externals BY DEFINITION don't then operate on the basis of the New Covenant!⁸ You say, "*what's the New Covenant?*" Well, in short, it was the promise God made in the OT, to - through Christ - not only forgive your sin and mine, but give you opportunity to be restored to Him BY turning your HEART toward Him/giving you, for example, an awareness of your need for Christ, a willingness to surrender TO Christ, AND a desire to live WITH Christ, APART from which, you and I, no matter our performance, would remain disconnected from Him!

⁶ Items adapted from Craig Groeschel, "Overcoming Shame," pt.2 - *Ghost of Christmas Past* - 2016. - Cited in "Shame" // Luke 8:40-48 // *Smoke from a Fire* #5 - J.D. Greear

⁷ *What Church Can Be: An Optimistic Vision With Some Blueprints* - Matthew Kruse - p.14

⁸ ESV+ Commentary note and summary of 2 Corinthians 5:12: "On Paul's commending himself, see note on 4:2. Paul writes so that the Corinthians will be able to respond to false teachers who do not operate on the basis of a new covenant ministry."

I just finished watching the Netflix series “Drive To Survive,” which is about Formula 1 drivers and teams. Pretty interesting, especially since I knew nothing about F1. But one of the things that stood out is that the difference between, say, the 1st and last place drivers on the grid. The performance difference between say Red Bull or Ferrari and Haas is truly minute, cuz at that level there’s only so much tweaking you can do to a car to extract another ounce of speed... Under the OT law, you and I were like those F1 cars/better-yet, like old beaters, in which, no matter how much God tweaked, pushed and prodded, better performance, in terms of obedience, wasn’t getting extracted out of us. No amount of new tires, cockpit modifications or “laws and sacrifices” made us any better at being “holy.” We continually under-performed... So in the New Covenant what God did is basically say, *“enough with the tweaking. I’m overhauling the engine,”* which is to say, He ceased writing His law on stones and scrolls that we were exhorted to internalize in order to be changed, and He began writing it on our hearts. As **Ezekiel 36:26** and **Jeremiah 24:7** say respectively: *“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I’ll remove the heart of stone...and give you a heart of flesh...to KNOW that I am the LORD* - not know about, but know/feel God’s Lordship. THAT’S the New Covenant! This good news of, as Charles Spurgeon said, *“pure unmingled grace”*⁹ - So NOT some new religion ushered in by Jesus, but rather news that God’s kinda gone out of the religious business all together, as He, THROUGH Jesus, poured out His love on you a sinner, scandalously swallowed up your debt on the Cross, raised from the dead so that you can, not just be told about Him, but KNOW Him, AND did it all without YOU doing a single moral or religious thing!... So Paul’s saying, these false teachers?/Their insistence on doing and externals, SHOWS they’re not-aligned with the New Covenant/Gospel or anything **life-giving**.

It’s like Madonna, whose story I know I’ve shared with you before, but in a moment of honesty she said in an interview, *“I have an iron will, and all my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy...I push past one spell of it, she said, and discover myself as special, and then I get to another stage and think I’m just mediocre and uninteresting...Again and again, she said...Because even though I’ve become somebody, I still have to prove I AM somebody.”*¹⁰ - **Can’t you, not only relate? But hear how incredibly suffocating that is?...** WHAT IF Madonna, with all her talent, charisma, ability, all-of-it, knew the grace of Jesus that could make her the ULTIMATE somebody - not just an artist, but a child of God the Father, servant of King Jesus, Missionary in the Spirit - Don’t you think she’d, not only, be better off, but if it were possible, maybe even MORE successful. Cuz someone like that - they wouldn’t stop working and performing - as I’ve told you before: The gospel isn’t opposed to effort; It’s opposed to earning! Someone like that wouldn’t stop performing. Rather she’d become free TO perform! Instead of HAVING to perform, maybe for the first time, she’d GET to perform... The grace of that? I imagine that would be like breathing **life-giving**, pure Oxygen, after years of suffocating under the toxic fumes of performance, posturing, pretense and **“outward appearance.”**

⁹ “God In The Covenant” sermon (1856)

¹⁰ Cited in *Counterfeit Gods* - Tim Keller, p.72

Ya have to see: The solution is the grace of Christ! Cuz grace creates this radical, new dynamic in which, being free from HAVING to perform/for God or others - cuz of course, Jesus perfectly performed FOR you - YOU can now, as the hymn says, *“lay your deadly doing down.”* - Drop those denials that only keep you bitter... Let go of your self-defenses that only bring discord... Cease the exhaustion of performing... IMAGINE a church where, *“what’s in the heart”/the grace of Christ being received and believed vs “outward appearances”* is what ruled. I’d submit that would, not only would be incredibly **life-giving**, but incredibly fun too! *“Like, as Matt Kruse again says, a bunch of broken people, who were nearly drowned in their sin, now lying on their backs smiling, and inhaling the grace of God (together!)”*¹¹ What a **Solution!**

So if the **Problem** is this culture of works that we so easily inhale, and the **Solution** is the grace of God in the Gospel, then let me close by giving you a very simple **Application**. ***Ya ready for it?***... Breathe! Inhale the grace of Jesus Christ. Breathe! Cuz see when Paul talks about *“boasting in us and what’s in the heart”* OR *“boasting in outward appearances,”* he’s drawing a contrast. He’s saying, *“you can boast in what you DO OR you can boast in what’s been DONE for you. What you can’t do is NOT boast.”* Just like breathing! You can breathe fresh air or toxic air, but what you can’t do, at least not if you wanna live, is NOT breathe. To *“boast”* in something is to make it your source of life/the thing on which you depend. When you *“boast”* in the grace of God in the Gospel, what you’re doing is saying, *“that’s my life! It’s the way I’m forgiven; the way I’m redeemed. The way I grow. It’s the way I’m free from having to do something to BE something... It’s what I need for life in as much as I need oxygen.”* And of course the way you get oxygen is you breathe! You take it in, let it fill you, enjoy it!... The same is true with the grace of God in the Gospel!

Which I’ll tell ya, is WHY, as a church, we want every conversation, sermon, gathering, meal, song, leader’s meeting, all of it, to in some way, help us *“breathe”* the Gospel! It’s WHY, you’ve probably noticed, we thread the Gospel all throughout our Order of Gathering each week: Open by first hearing a **Declaration** from God; then after considering something of who He is, we move to a **Responsive Prayer** focused on corporate and personal confession of sin and our need for Christ. After which we receive a **Gospel Declaration**, reminding us that God is gracious. That then leads us to **Sing** and praise Him for who He is and what He’s done; AFTER which/and as grace-given people, we enjoy **Connecting** with each other, BEFORE being **Taught** the Scriptures, as a way of learning to trust and rest IN Jesus’ grace; after which we **Give** in light of His grace and are **Sent-Out** to point those around us TO His grace! It’s all just breathing-in the Gospel, both HERE AND within our Missional Family Meetings, since unless you’re Jason Bourne or Michael Phelps or something, you should prolly breathe more than once-a-week!

Friends, that’s the bottom-line if church is gonna be a **life-giving “Hub”**!... Honestly, it’s not unlike learning to Scuba Dive/any of you that’ve ever scuba dived know there’s a ton of things ya gotta learn and do: How to strap-on the tank, enter the water, read your Depth & Pressure Gauge, manage your BCD/Buoyancy Control Device - tons of stuff... But MAINLY, ya just gotta

¹¹ Adapted from quote in *What Church Can Be: An Optimistic Vision With Some Blueprints* - Matthew Kruse - p.15

learn to breathe! Cuz EVERYTHING from your buoyancy, to your safety, to just your ability to enjoy the water, all comes back to breathing!...Church, we have a ton of work to do, things to pray about, decisions to make, needs to meet! But our foundational rhythm - the **life-giving** reality we're tethered to - is NOT doing good works in the neighborhood/as important as those are, or buttoning-down theology, as needed as theology is, or generating inspirational experiences, perfecting operational systems, engaging in politics, or even fostering church growth, BUT continually learning to breathe-in the grace of God in Jesus Christ!...So let me ask you this morning: ***Is that you? Are you breathing-in Jesus's grace for you OR are ya still, in some way, inhaling the toxic fumes of "deadly doing?" Breathe the fresh air of Jesus' grace, BOTH for your life AND the life-giving nature of THIS, your church family!...Let's Pray!***