

The Pastor's Pursuit of Straying Sheep

2 Corinthians 11:1-3

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Introduction

Turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 11 and follow along with me as I read the opening four verses. “I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; indeed, do bear with me. ²For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. ³But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. ⁴For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.”

Apostasy is an ever-present threat to the church of God. And it is the most serious, severe, terrifying, and heart-breaking reality that the people of God ever have to grapple with: that someone who is amongst the fellowship of the Lord's people, who is a member of the church, who professes to love and trust in Christ, who seems engaged in the battle against sin, who reads his Bible and prays and even evangelizes, can suddenly, and often without warning, totally renounce his faith in Christ, and fall away from the living God. That's the language of Hebrews 3:12-14, which says, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.”

You say, “Wait a minute! Are you saying it's possible to lose our salvation?” No. In John 6:39, Jesus says, “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me *I lose nothing*, but raise it up on the last day.” Jesus doesn't lose any one of the sheep that His Father gave Him. In John 10:27-29, He says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give *eternal* life to them, and they will *never* perish; and *no one* will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and *no one* is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.” Some people say, “Well, no one can snatch us out of the Father's hand, but we can jump out of His hand.” But that's nonsense! We are not greater than the Father. We cannot loosen the iron grip of His love. And Paul says in Romans 8:38-39 that “neither death, life, angels, principalities, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, *nor any other created thing*, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our

Lord.” Are you a created thing? Then even you cannot separate yourself from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

You say, “Well, then how can you warn us against apostasy? Against falling away from the living God?” The answer is that those who fall away were never genuinely saved to begin with. 1 John 2:19 says, “They went out *from* us, but they were not really *of* us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.” And so you see, there are those among us in whom there is an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. Church members! Bible readers! Compassionate servants! Even evangelists—who are hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, renounce faith in the Son of God, and prove themselves to never have been believers in the first place. As I said, it is a heart-breaking reality.

And it is heart-breaking precisely because the consequences are so severe. The writer of Hebrews goes on to speak about the sin of apostasy, saying, If that happens, chapter 10 verse 26, “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and ‘the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.’ Middle of verse 28: “How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God?” Verse 31: “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Apostasy, is a terrifying reality. Rejection of God, rejection of Christ, rejection of the Gospel—in full knowledge of and exposure to the truth—can only mean a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire that consumes God’s enemies.

We could wish that the church would never experience this—that we would never go through the grief and sadness and pain of having one whom we’ve regarded as a brother or sister in Christ deny Him, and lay themselves open to such a terrifying expectation of judgment. But in the inscrutable wisdom of God, that’s not to be so. We do experience this. We do witness apostasy. Those of you who have had friends or family members who have fallen prey to the seduction of false doctrine and apostatized from the Gospel, you know this pain as well. This sense of grief, and mourning, and loss. It breaks your heart. You hear about it, and you think, “What?! How did this happen?! When did you start doubting the truth?!” And you inevitably think, “What could I have done to prevent this? Could I have had a conversation, refuted an argument, responded to some book—something! anything! that would have guarded my friend, or my mom or dad, or my son or daughter, from being taken in and seduced by heretical doctrine! And if there was something you knew you could do to prevent that, I’d willing to bet that every last one of you would be willing to do whatever it would take—short of sin—to prevent it! Even if it were inconvenient! Even if it were difficult! Even if it disrupted your schedule! Even if it made you look foolish.

Well, the Apostle Paul finds himself in just this situation in 2 Corinthians 11. The Corinthian church had come under the spell of false teaching—of damning doctrine concerning Christ and the Gospel—from false teachers who had come from Jerusalem, claiming to be apostles of Christ. Paul doesn't spend any time describing the specific details of their heresy, but in chapter 11 verse 22 we find that they were boasting in their Hebrew roots. And in several places—especially the whole of chapter 3—we find Paul repeatedly emphasizing the freedom, and the saving efficacy, and the permanence of the New Covenant as opposed to the Mosaic Covenant. And so we surmise from this that these false apostles were Judaizers—that they taught, Acts 15:1, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Faith in Christ was necessary for salvation, but it was not sufficient. You had to add your own works to faith in Christ's work for salvation.

And in addition to that Judaizing element, we also observe that these men were dominated by a spirit of triumphalism. “Jesus is the King! And so those who serve Jesus ought to walk in the constant *victory* that Christ accomplished!” They had an overrealized eschatology. They expected the external physical blessings that the church will receive in heaven—on the New Earth—to be enjoyed in the here and now. And so they measured ministerial success by fleshly externals—by a weighty personal presence, by rhetorical eloquence, by commanding significant speaking fees, by growing large followings, and by having ecstatic, mystical spiritual experiences. They were the original charismatic prosperity preachers of the Word of Faith movement! And in verse 4 Paul calls this preaching *another* Jesus, a *different* spirit, and a *different* gospel. This wasn't minor disagreement on secondary issues. This prosperity-laced legalism was a whole other gospel. And so these false teachers have come peddling this heresy to the Corinthians, and the Corinthians had become enamored with it. And particularly in chapters 10 to 13, Paul aims to snatch his dear friends from the flames of damning doctrine.

Now, in the greater part of chapter 10, Paul has rebuked the false teachers for their self-commendation and fleshly boasting. He says in verses 17 and 18, “He who boasts is to boast in the Lord. For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.” But when we look ahead to chapters 11 and 12, what do we find but Paul boasting! He says in 11:17, “What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting.” In verse 21 he says, “But whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself.” And after he's done, he says in chapter 12 verse 11, like he's got a bad taste in his mouth, “I have become foolish; you yourselves have compelled me.”

You see, because the Corinthians have been duped by the flashiness and showmanship of the false apostles—who only succeed in their deceptions by seducing the Corinthians with their lavish boasting of their own fleshly accomplishments—Paul feels forced to do what he hates to do. He adopts the tactics of his adversaries, and engages in the foolishness of boasting in order to

expose the folly of the false apostles, as well as to show the Corinthians that his ministry and his Gospel are worthy of their wholehearted allegiance. He sees the Corinthians—whom he regards as his spiritual children—flirting with apostasy. Flirting with being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Flirting with being overcome by an evil and unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. Flirting with that terrifying expectation of judgment, staring down the fury of the fire that consumes the adversaries of God. And even though he finds it extremely distasteful, he will engage in foolish boasting if it means that he might be able to rescue his spiritual children from damning heresy and apostasy. One commentator says, “His affection for his converts is so great, that he will go to almost any length to prevent them from becoming dupes of unscrupulous men, and to keep them loyal to Christ” (Tasker).

And so the opening verses of chapter 11 constitute Paul’s plea for the Corinthians to excuse him for his foolish boasting. He says in verse 1: “I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Indeed, do bear with me!” “I recognize that this is ridiculous. But please, humor me. Indulge me in a little foolishness, if it means that I rescue your souls from apostasy!” And then, in the following verses, he explains why he engages in this foolish boasting. He gives three reasons that sort of cascade and build on one another. Follow the argument here. He says, “Bear with me in a little foolishness,” verse 1. “For,” verse 2, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy.” So the reason he’s going to act foolishly is because he is jealous for the Corinthians. And the reason he’s jealous for them is that like the father of the bride, he’s betrothed the Corinthians to Christ, and he hopes to present his daughter to Christ as a pure virgin at the marriage supper of the Lamb. But he’s fearful, verse 3. He’s afraid they’ll be led astray—by false teachers empowered by Satan—from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. And the reason he’s fearful of their disloyalty, verse 4, is that they so willingly tolerate the false teachers, who preach a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel.

In this passage, Paul describes himself as foolish, as jealous, and as fearful—adjectives that are so uncharacteristic of this great Apostle! a state he could only be driven to by the unbearable thought of his dear spiritual children falling away from Christ! And as he explains why he’s willing to go to such desperate lengths to rescue them, he models for us how the faithful servant of Christ reacts when those in the church become enamored with false teaching and are in danger of forsaking the truth. And we see that in **three parts**. First, we see **the minister’s jealousy**. Second, **the minister’s responsibility**. And third, **the minister’s anxiety**.

I. The Minister’s Jealousy (v. 2a)

First is **the minister’s jealousy**. Look with me at the first part of verse 2: “I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness. For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy.” “Bear with the foolish boasting that I’m about to engage in, because I’m acting out of jealousy!”

We know that jealousy can drive someone to rash and foolish actions. Proverbs 6:34 says, “Jealousy enrages a man.” Proverbs 27:4 says, “Wrath is fierce and anger is a flood, but who can stand before jealousy?” Jealousy often makes people say and do things that they wouldn’t normally say or do. And in this case, Paul’s jealousy for the faithfulness of the Corinthians is driving him to foolishness. Someone comes to Paul and says, “Whoa, Paul, calm down! Get a hold of yourself!” And Paul says, “Don’t expect me to be calm when my dear spiritual children are in danger of committing spiritual adultery! Of abandoning faithfulness to Christ for smooth-talking prosperity preaching! There is nothing more serious in the world! The last thing you can expect from me is dispassionate commentary! My heart burns *hot* for my children in the faith!”

And Paul describes this jealousy in a striking way. He says, “I am jealous for you *with a godly jealousy*,” or, literally, “with the jealousy of God.” Paul is experiencing the very same jealousy that God Himself experiences. We don’t often think about it, but Scripture is clear that God is jealous. In fact, there are few things in Scripture that are as well-attested as the truth that Yahweh our God is a jealous God. In Exodus 20 verse 5, just after God has given the Second Commandment which prohibits idolatry, God says, “You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, Yahweh your God, am a *jealous* God.” And this is a consistent theme in the Law. The prohibition to idolatry is constantly grounded in Yahweh’s *jealousy*. Deuteronomy 4:24, Deuteronomy 6:15. We know that Israel breaks the Second Commandment, and attempts to worship Yahweh through the golden calf. And Moses intercedes and the Lord agrees not to destroy the whole nation, but promises to enter into covenant with them once again. And in Exodus 34:14, He grounds the command to flee idolatry in His jealousy, this time with a significant intensification: “For you shall not worship any other god, for Yahweh, *whose name is Jealous*, is a jealous God.” Jealousy so runs to the heart of God’s character that He declares that His *name* is Jealous!

Now, how can this be? How can it be possible—how can it be right—for God to be jealous? Isn’t jealousy a bad thing? It’s listed as one of the deeds of the flesh in Galatians 5:20. James 3:16 says that where there is jealousy there is disorder and every evil thing. Isn’t jealousy the fruit of suspicion and insecurity, of ignorance and mistrust, of anxiety and fear—none of which could ever be predicated of our Holy God? Isn’t jealousy that sinful affection whereby we long to possess and control what does not belong to us? (Storms, 123). But there is nothing that does not belong to God! Nothing that lays outside of His control!

Well, what I’m describing is sinful, human jealousy—that petty possessiveness and pride-fueled covetousness that wants what others have and hates them when you can’t have it. But when God reveals Himself as jealous, He’s not referring to sinful human jealousy at all. Instead, He’s speaking of that kind of jealousy that is passionately committed to protecting a love-relationship and to avenge it when it is threatened or broken (Packer, 170). Husbands, if your wife was approached and pursued by another man, and she was being enticed by the attention he paid to

her, so that her affection and loyalty to you was being divided, how would you feel? Your love for your wife and your regard for the purity of marriage would compel you to rise up and protect that relationship. If such a husband felt no pangs of jealousy for his wife's exclusive devotion, we wouldn't praise him for his self-control! We'd think that he didn't care much at all for his wife's affection, and that he didn't think too highly of marriage in general. There's a sort of jealousy that's virtuous that we would expect that husband to have—that we'd fault him for not having.

Well, all throughout the Scriptures the Lord represents Himself as the husband of His people. In Isaiah 54:5, God says to Israel: "For your husband is your Maker, whose name is Yahweh of hosts." And we know from Ephesians 5 and Revelation 19 that the Church is the Bride of Christ. This is why Israel's idolatry is so often called harlotry and adultery. Jeremiah 3:9 says of Judah, "Because of the lightness of her harlotry, she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees." For God's people to commit idolatry—to worship and seek satisfaction in that which is not God—is to commit spiritual adultery. And just like we would expect a faithful husband to be jealous for his wife when her affections are enticed by another man, so is the Lord appropriately zealous for the faithfulness of His bride. John Calvin puts this so well. He writes, "As the purer and chaster a husband is, the more grievously he is offended when he sees his wife inclining to a rival; so the Lord, who has wedded us to Himself in truth, declares that He burns with the hottest jealousy whenever, neglecting the purity of His holy marriage, we defile ourselves with abominable lusts, and especially when the worship of His deity... is transferred to another, or adulterated with some superstition; since in this way we not only violate our [pledged faithfulness], but defile the [marriage bed], by giving access to adulterers" (*Institutes*, 2.8.18).

And so you see God is jealous for the wholehearted devotion, the undivided loyalty, the exclusive affection of His bride, of the people He has joined to Himself in salvation! He cannot tolerate our spiritual adultery! And Paul says, "Dear Corinthians, I am jealous for you with that very same kind of jealousy! When you tolerate the heresy of these false teachers—when you allow yourselves to be seduced by those preaching a different Christ and a different gospel—you're flirting with committing spiritual adultery! And so far from being able to sit back, and calmly and dispassionately reason with you, as if it were a matter of no consequence, my love and affection for you compels me to be jealous for you! To be zealously protective of your loyalty and devotion! If I have to stoop to the level of boasting to protect you from these phonies who boast so much in themselves, then I beg of you, bear with me in a little foolishness!"

And Grace Church, if your pastors, or your Bible study shepherds, or even your fellow Christians have to stoop to the uncomfortable place of speaking directly with you about sin in your life or about your becoming enamored with unsound teaching, bear with them in a little discomfort. Because if they're possessed of the same Spirit that Paul is, if they have a shepherd's heart like he does, they can't just calmly sit back and *suggest* to you, "Oh, you might want to consider—"

No! “Hey! Do you see where you’re heading?! Get back on track! You’re beginning to be enticed by this false doctrine?! Put that away!” If that happens, dear friends: don’t take offense. Bear with them in a little discomfort, for, by God’s grace, they are *jealous* for your faithfulness to Christ.

II. The Minister’s Responsibility (v. 2b)

But you say, “Wait a second. Why should *Paul* be jealous? The Corinthians aren’t *his* bride! God is the husband of His people! Is Paul thinking too highly of himself? Does he just have some kind of God complex? If Christ is the bridegroom, why should Paul be jealous? Well, that brings us to our **second** point. First, there was the minister’s jealousy. Now we come, **number two**, to **the minister’s responsibility**. Look again at verse 2: “For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin.”

Paul doesn’t have delusions of being the Bridegroom. Paul sees himself as the father of the bride! As we’ve said, Paul regards the converts of the Corinthian church as his own spiritual children. He calls them his children in chapter 6 verse 13 and chapter 12 verse 14. In 1 Corinthians 4:15 he says, “In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.” And at the same time, Paul’s spiritual children are the spiritual bride of Christ. And so Paul views himself as the father of the bride, who, through his preaching of the Gospel and the conversion of the Corinthians, as it were betrothed his daughter to her heavenly bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, in Israel, betrothal was a formal marriage contract in which a young woman passed from her father’s authority to the authority of her husband (Harris, 736). It’s something analogous to what we think of as engagement, except it was significantly more binding. Those who were betrothed were legally husband and wife, such that a betrothal could only be annulled by death or divorce. Usually, there was an intervening period of about a year, wherein the husband would prepare a home for his new family. And the betrothal would finally culminate in a wedding festival followed by physical consummation and cohabitation.

But in that intervening betrothal period, Deuteronomy 22:13–21 explains that special responsibility fell to the bride’s father to protect his daughter’s purity, to guard her affections for her husband. He was to help her remain exclusively faithful to the man to whom she had been promised. All other potential suitors were to be warded off and rejected, all so that on her wedding day her father could present her as a pure virgin, with undivided loyalties, to the man who was to become her husband.

Paul says he’s betrothed the Corinthians to one husband, to the Lord Jesus Christ. And during this time of betrothal—between their conversion and the time Christ returns for His bride—Paul

sees it as his solemn responsibility to ensure that on that last day he can present them to Christ as a pure virgin. He sees it as his responsibility to safeguard their exclusive devotion to their husband from any rival paramours who would seek to seduce and entice her to themselves—to preserve their moral and especially their theological integrity so as to ensure that they don't commit spiritual adultery.

What a lesson this is for those of us who seek to serve Christ's Church! Especially for pastors and elders, but even applicable to each and every one of you, because each and every one of you—if you're in Christ—is a priest of the New Covenant, 1 Peter 2:9, a minister of reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5:18, called to lay down your lives in sacrificial ministry to your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Do you see how invested Paul is in the faithfulness and holiness of his fellow believers? Do you see how bound up his own heart is with their spiritual health and well-being? What if your daughter or your sister, engaged to be married to her fiancé within the next year, had begun to be intrigued by another man who had captured her affection? Or, considering how binding betrothal was: what if she was already married, and you knew that she was being tempted to pursue a relationship with another man? Wouldn't you drop everything you had to do—wouldn't you do everything you could—to admonish her from Scripture and urge her to remain faithful to the covenant she had made? Of course you would.

Well, friends, the world, the flesh, and the devil himself are in constant pursuit of the affection and fidelity of your brothers and sisters in Christ. These potential paramours are constantly aiming their seductions at the hearts of God's people. And one of the ways that we are safeguarded from that kind of spiritual adultery is through the ministry of one to another in the fellowship of the faith. Hebrews 3:12 warns us to take care that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But how do we avoid that? Next verse: “But *encourage one another* day after day...so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin!” Hebrews 10:26–31 outlines that terrifying expectation of judgment and the furious fire that consumes God's adversaries that are the consequences of apostasy. But what comes immediately before that in verses 24 and 25? “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, *not forsaking our own assembling together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near!”

Friends, we need the fellowship of the body of Christ! And I mean *genuine* fellowship! I don't mean shallow, casual, “Hi-Bye” *acquaintance* relationships! I mean *fellowship*! The watchful eye of a brother or a sister who feels so invested in our spiritual well-being that they burn with a fierce, godly *jealousy* when they see us enticed by sin! What a *gift* it was for the Corinthians to have Paul so concerned about their welfare! To be willing to become foolish for the sake of safeguarding their devotion to Christ! We are so backward today that we would dismiss the blessing of such fatherly concern as the overly judgmental, holier-than-thou attitude of someone who won't mind his own business! How foolish we are! We need each other, Grace Church! And

if we want to take seriously our calling as ministers of the New Covenant, we will feel the weight of responsibility for the sanctification of ourselves, and of the brothers and sisters the Lord has given to us as fellow members of His body!

We need to know something of what Paul meant when he spoke of “the daily pressure of concern for all the churches.” When he said, “Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” When he said in Galatians 4:19, “With you I am in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” Friend, do you know anything of that anguish? Do you know anything of that daily pressure? Anything of that intense concern? Are you committed to defending the purity of the bride that has been entrusted to your care during this time of betrothal—of safeguarding her undivided devotion against all attacks—whether they be moral or whether they be theological? Do you spend your time investing in her, training her, equipping her, strengthening her to resist the seductions of rival lovers (Storms, 129)? That is what Christ has called us to as ministers of the New Covenant, as servants of His Church.

III. The Minister’s Anxiety (v. 3)

Well, we’ve seen the minister’s jealousy, and the minister’s responsibility. We come now, number three, to **the minister’s anxiety**. Paul betrothed the Corinthians to one husband, in the hope that he would present her to Christ as a pure virgin. But, look again at verse 3: “But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.” This is why he is roused to jealousy! Because he’s fearful that Satan is going to deceive them into infidelity, that they will betray the simplicity and purity of their devotion!

And what oceans of meaning and significance are wrapped up in that final phrase! The very essence of the Christian life is can be summed up as the single-minded, pure devotion to the Lord Jesus. “Simplicity” translates the Greek word *haplotēs*. It doesn’t mean simple as opposed to complicated, but speaks rather of *simplicity* as opposed to *duplicity*. It refers to single-mindedness, undivided-ness. The devotion that we’re to have for Christ is not to be double-minded and two-faced, but single-minded and undivided. We are to be exclusively preoccupied with pleasing *Him*, serving *Him*, enjoying *Him*, seeking satisfaction in *Him* and in Him alone. It speaks of the undivided loyalty and affection that a wife is to have for her husband and a husband for his wife. It is the covenant wedding vow of “forsaking all others and keeping yourself only for Him.” “Purity” speaks to much the same emphasis. Our devotion to Christ is to be pure, not polluted with any adulterous infatuations with false doctrine.

This is what it all comes down to, friends! This is what life is about! This is Christianity: single-minded, pure *devotion* to Jesus. He has your heart! He has captured your affections! He has so satisfied the deepest longings of your soul that you seek satisfaction in nothing and no one else!

He is the treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again. And from joy over the inestimable worth of this treasure, he goes and sells all he has and buys that field! He is the pearl of great price that a merchant finds and sells all he has to buy it! The value of that pearl makes it so infinitely desirable that it causes one to joyfully part ways with all that he owns—all that he holds dear—just so he can lay hold of that precious stone!

The worth of Christ makes us cry out with Paul, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain!” That is to say, that Jesus is more satisfying than all that life can offer and all that death can take! And again: “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ!” And with David in Psalm 63: “O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, In a dry and weary land where there is no water!” “Your lovingkindness is better than life, and my soul is satisfied” in you! *Apostasy?! Falling away from Christ?! Where else could I possibly go for greater satisfaction than Jesus?!* Dear friends, are these the cries of your heart? Do you love Him? Does your heart pulse with single-minded devotion to Jesus?

If not, it can only be because you don’t see Him with the eyes of saving faith. It may be that the allurements and enticements and seductions of this world have clouded your sight of Him, so that His glory appears but dimly in your eyes. You need to repent! You need to return to your first love! to put away those idols that entice you and look upon Him afresh with the eyes of faith! Others of you have never seen Him with the eyes of faith, because you still need new eyes. You need to be born again! And I call you to turn from your sin, and feast the eyes of your heart upon the beauty of this glorious Savior—crushed under the weight of the wrath of God for sinners, risen in victory over sin and death, and willing to receive all those who turn from their sins and trust in Him for righteousness! Lay hold of the pearl of great price this morning! Come to the one whose lovingkindness is better than life!

“The simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.” That’s Christianity. But Paul is afraid. He’s afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, the Corinthians’ minds would be led astray from this single-minded devotion to Christ, whose loyal love is better than life. How did Satan deceive Eve? Turn to Genesis 3. He led her mind astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to God. He came with fine-sounding arguments. Genesis 3:1: “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” And immediately Satan’s battle plan is exposed. He’s going to aim to paint God as this narrow-hearted, tight-fisted, prohibitive kill-joy. “Has God put you in this lush garden and forbidden you to enjoy the fruit of its trees?”

And the answer, of course, is no. And Eve had at least gotten that right. She said, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat.” God hasn’t put us in this garden only to tell us that we can’t enjoy it. In fact, in Genesis 2:16 He said just the opposite! He said, “From any tree of the

garden you may eat freely,” except the one. And Eve tells Satan that. And he replies, verse 4, “You surely will not die!” “No way is that going to happen! You know what’s going on here, Eve? God knows that when you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you’ll know good and evil. You’ll be like God! And He doesn’t want that kind of competition! He wants to keep the blessing of knowing good and evil all to Himself!”

See the strategy? “God is stingy! Miserly! Tight-fisted! There’s no satisfaction in obedience! He’s hogging the best blessings to Himself!” Which is just insane! Genesis 2:9 says that every tree that grew in the garden was pleasing to the sight and good for food. Verse 10 says that four rivers flowed through it, furnishing life to the fertile paradise of the garden. Verses 11 and 12 speak about how the land was rich with precious stones. And God encourages man to enjoy all things freely, save for that one tree. And Eve, standing in paradise, with no lack of anything, began to question God’s generosity and provision for her—began to suspect Him of stinginess and narrow-heartedness. Her mind had been led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to God, by the cunning deception of Satan. And because of that, Adam and Eve committed the most heinous act of spiritual adultery in the history of the world. In a perfect world, with unhindered fellowship with God, free from the bonds of a sinful nature, Adam and Eve abandoned their loyalty to God and broke His law.

And Paul’s saying, “I’m afraid that very same thing is happening with you, Corinthians.” And they say, “What? We haven’t been talking to any snakes lately!” “No, but you’re sure getting comfortable with his servants!” 2 Corinthians 11:14 and 15: Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and so do his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. “These false teachers are nothing other than the emissaries of Satan sent to do his bidding! And just as he promised Eve a more triumphant, victorious, autonomous life on earth, so are these charlatans seducing you with the promise of a triumphant, victorious, and man-centered ‘Christianity’ where you get to make much of *yourselves* rather than Christ!”

This is how the Enemy works, friends! He hasn’t changed his game plan in 6,000 years! He lies to us. He aims at our minds—speaking with plausible, smooth-sounding lies—and attempts to deceive us into believing that there is greater pleasure to be had in sin and apart from communion Christ than there is in a pure and single-minded devotion to Christ. “Oh, don’t believe God’s Word! Indeed, did God really say? He’s just trying to steal your pleasure! It’s much more satisfying to indulge that craving! to nurse that bitterness! to lash out in anger! Don’t be such a slave to the Bible; it’s much more fulfilling to decide for yourself what’s true and what’s false!”

And this is why theology is of paramount importance in the Christian life! Satan comes for our minds! He aims to corrupt our thinking! Look at verse 3 again: “I’m afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your *minds* will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of

devotion to Christ.” Some people say, “All those theological debates are just ridiculous! They’re for the academic, intellectual, egg-head types who reduce their Christianity to propositions and have no sense of intimacy with Jesus! What I care about is *passion* for Christ! Like what you were saying before, Mike: it’s *devotion* to Jesus that is the essence of the Christian life, not doctrine!” The whole point of this passage is: a sincere and pure devotion to Christ is *founded* upon sound doctrine! Satan comes to lead our *minds* astray from pure devotion to Christ! Because it’s what’s in our minds that informs and enflames our hearts! It’s truth perceived in the mind that fires the furnace of our devotion to Christ! It’s only as we know Jesus *as He actually is*—as He’s revealed Himself in the Scriptures, and not as we’ve imagined Him to be—that He can become the source of all our satisfaction, that He can appear so surpassingly valuable, so inestimably worthy in our sight!

Your theology is the very *foundation* upon which your devotion to Christ is built! Any so-called devotion that does not flow out of the truth concerning Jesus is nothing more than infatuation! Doctrine drives devotion! *Theology* is the only engine for *doxology*! So “Gird up the loins of your *mind*,” Grace Church! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and *mind*! Have done with that anemic counterfeit of Christianity that disdains deep study and dedicated thinking! It is a sham! Retain the pattern of sound words!

Satan is coming for your hearts, but he’s coming *through* your minds. And the only weapon against his temptations is the surpassing pleasure of possessing the pearl of great price. But friends, you can’t be satisfied by a Jesus you don’t know. An unknown Christ is an unenjoyed Christ. And it’s the *joy* of the Lord that is your strength.

Conclusion

Dear friends, the threat of apostasy is real, and it is terrifying, and it is heart-breaking. And one of the safeguards against apostasy that the Lord has provided for us is the fellowship of the local church. If He has saved you, He has called you to ministry—especially to your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. As we seek to carry out that ministry, may we follow the example of the Apostle Paul. May we be animated by a godly **jealousy** for the faithfulness of our fellow believers. May we feel the **responsibility** that we have to present every man complete in Christ. May we be marked by the appropriate **anxiety** for one another’s spiritual health and well-being. And may we press hard after a biblical knowledge of Christ, that we might cling to Him with sincere and pure devotion.