

A life centered on Jesus brings flourishing and lasting joy.

I have a confession to make... I live much of my life as if I am the center of the universe. Shocking I know! There are days I wake up and think everyone should be orbiting around me, around my desires, my perspective, my infinite wisdom in all things!

Maybe I am good at hiding it, or not so much, but if I am honest (and I try to be), more often than I should, I live as if I am the brite center of everything. And I wonder if you do too?!

Where does that come from? I think it is an ancient sickness but modern commentators are so good at expressing it.

Alan Watts, an influential philosopher, leading interpreter of Eastern philosophy and Zen Buddhism. And in 1971 he recorded a television show called "A Conversation With Myself." Roaming the mountains of California he talks of life as illustrated by the things he sees around him, where the noise of the city doesn't exist and nature can be itself. He probably rightly urged us beyond the rectangles we keep building in life, attempts to control the "wiggles" of nature... but something else he said, motivated by a flower in a field, actually shapes much of how we live whether we realize it or not.

"I feel that I am a peopling of the whole universe. I seem to be a center at which the entire energy of the universe realizes itself, or comes alive: a sort of aperture through which the universe appears. I am related to the universe as a center to a circumference."

Poetic as it may be, what Watts was saying is that you are the center of the universe. Things only matter because you are at the middle. For Watts it felt right, and to that point maybe it worked from an outsider's perspective of success. There was money, homes, requests to speak and teach. But it was a spiraling to a center that couldn't hold up. And just two years after claiming his place in the universe, Watts would die, his body wrecked by alcoholism.

I share this story, not to say, 'look it won't work out, you as the center!' which I think is true. But to warn us away from believing the ancient lie that we should be at the center. When we do, we miss what we were meant for. Real, abundant, vibrant life.

Strangely, from an account of church drama we gain this insight, **A life centered on Jesus brings flourishing and lasting joy.**

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

There is drama in the church - unsurprising isn't it! Paul has to this point gently reminded believers in Corinth of the comfort God gives in affliction and how the God who raises the dead can be relied on. When we feel like no one else is there for us, he holds us and gives us a family to belong to.

This letter though is occasioned by a challenge to Paul's credibility as an apostle. Quick history - Paul was moving through Asia and the Mediterranean preaching the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and coming to Corinth, he preached, there were a large number of converts, people who, hearing the message of hope, believed in Jesus and the church was born there. Paul remains to "father" them in the early days and maintains his relationship by visiting, sending partners, and writing letters.

But over time there were other teachers making stops in Corinth. Guys who wanted the same respect or following they thought Paul had, so they would stir up division and plant the seeds questioning Paul's place as apostle. To this point in the letter he has been making clear that the church has an anchor to hold onto and now he moves on to clarify the hurt the church has expressed feeling.

We are a bit disadvantaged here as we listen in on a conversation we really don't have the full context for. But in this exchange I think Paul models a life and ministry lived with the gospel he preaches at the center. And that makes him vastly different from what we are used to.

Looking then at his response I think there are some clear marks of his life that we can aspire to, and the motivation for that life that hopefully we can cling to.

1) Marks of a Gospel-Centered Life

We know that Paul had planned to come to Corinth twice, on his way to Macedonia and on his way out, but because of problems in the church, and probably because of the afflictions Paul was experiencing in Ephesus, he visited just once.

Seeing issues on the ground then he wrote a “harsh letter” correcting them and calling them to something better. We don’t have that letter, the harsh ones don’t seem to be the ones we keep, so we don’t know the exact issue but it is harsh enough that if he had to deal with the trouble in person it would cause them pain.

This leads to accusations that Paul’s word can’t be trusted, he said one thing and did another... but he responds in such a way that exposes his heart and the fuel behind his ministry.

Compassion, confidence, courage, and care. Four marks of a gospel-centered life.

a) Compassion

He begins this section with the hope of boasting in each other into eternity. That all parties would rejoice in the way the Lord used them to refine and strengthen each other. He doesn’t lash out or reject them, he says ‘one day we’ll look back on this and praise the Lord for each other’.

Now I am not known for subtly or kid-gloves. So when I read of this account I am waiting for the cracking of heads to commence. “Don’t be so stupid, it’s not all about you!” But that is not what Paul dishes.

“Although Paul refrains from saying so, it may have been the Corinthians who were in the wrong in this matter. Instead of showing loving concern for him in his grave difficulties in Ephesus they had written him off as unspiritual and vacillating...” PB

His response is tempered with meekness and gentleness which Paul said was the mark of his ministry. Simplicity and godly sincerity.

“Merciful Paul was so like his Master who “is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that

all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). “Just as God extended one more opportunity for repentance and restoration to the world by separating the two comings of Christ, Paul too wanted to extend this same opportunity to the Corinthians.” (Hafemann)

He can respond with compassion because he has experienced something of a redefining grace in his life. He is not living for the accolades or influence other traveling preachers think they need. His life is rooted in the simple message of the grace of God that he proclaims and it shapes him. The hope then too is that is shaping the church.

It is not a spineless compassion however.

b) Confidence

Paul’s conscience is clear in how he is leading and serving the church. He is not writing to them anything other than what they already understand. He knows that sometimes the edges of life might scratch us but that doesn’t stop us from moving forward.

For Paul, his confidence is not centered in himself but in the purpose he has been given as he says “by the grace of God.” There is a steadfastness here that he trusts his decision to cut one visit was the right thing to do, so much so that he calls God to witness against him if he is wrong.

This is one that is harder for us to grasp because frankly we have been in so many environments where people exude not confidence in their calling but what seems to be self and their priorities. Paul shows that is not always the truth...

“We who live in a world that has known both violent revolutions and cruel tyrannies have grown cynical about all power. We always assume that anyone who says ‘I’m doing this for your own good’ is in fact manipulating us, twisting our arms to make us do something for their good rather than ours. Some have even suggested that Paul was up to the same trick. But Paul’s whole point, throughout this letter, is that this is not the kind of power he has, or wants to have. He has no intention of playing the high-and-mighty lord and master over their faith; the faith they have is the faith by which they stand fast as genuine Christians, and it isn’t his business to interfere with that, to come between them and the Lord himself. Rather, as a servant of the Lord on their behalf, he has a responsibility to work together with them, to increase their love and loyalty, and thereby also their joy.” Wright

There is a deep integrity here that lends to his confidence in ministry.

We have a church made up of a lot of spiritual refugees. We have talked about this before; those of us who have come to Reservoir after being in places or here where there was hurt, maybe a lack of these marks of gospel-centered ministry, and we carry scars that at times can taint how we view interactions.

Even for the young church in Corinth, it seems that something similar is at play. But Paul, graciously continues in ministry. Confident in his call and the purposes of God.

“I made up my mind” he says, to work with them for their joy. That’s the goal.

c) Courage

This mark is closely tied to confidence but it is something more. A willingness to put it on the line, to do what is hard. He doesn’t at all lose his compassion or confidence but from those marks Paul acts courageously in shepherding this church.

Because his identity is rooted in Christ and being who he has called him to be, Paul can call things out and be bold in challenge and correction when needed. That is what the harsh letter is all about.

This is Paul being anything but a people-pleaser. Where he could tell everyone what they want to hear and leave everyone immature and hurting, instead he is direct and calls them to something more than the sin and dislocated hopes that had been stirring among them.

This is one my personality can get behind. He is courageous in facing his own feelings, writing in anguish and much affliction, because it was what’s best for them.

The church could go completely off the rails if Paul was only compassionate and confident in his own mission. Never calling out sin or division. Essentially leaving the church to their own devices. This is where grace is sometimes a punch in the face, a nice clean slap to wake us up.

Taking this out of the shepherd-church relationship for a moment, this is the gospel-centered life willing to fight the things that are unhealthy, to be honest where honesty costs some skin, to come face-to-face with the lie we have been believing and cut them down with the truth of Jesus. This is an emboldened life.

Matthew 10:28 “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (ESV)

Seeking justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God takes courage. And that is what is on display here. And like the compassion and confidence, this courage is done, all of Paul’s ministry is done motivated by love.

d) Care

All of these marks are rooted in love - it is the great motivator in life and ministry - Paul can take abuse, accusation, ghosting... all because he has an abiding love for the church.

2 Corinthians 2:4 “For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.” (ESV)

Like that of confidence, we have a hard time because we don’t think anyone can actually be motivated by love but Paul has experienced a love so amazing that he can’t help but let it be the rudder of his life.

Paul did not respond with angered rejection but with wounded love. “It was literally overflowing love that motivated and energized his severe letter and energizes him now as he defends his integrity to the Corinthians.” Hughes

We long to be loved and if it is not happening in the church something has gone terribly wrong. It is not a sentimental love but one rooted in love received from God in Christ. It is then the power of Paul’s ministry. And it can be the power of our lives.

Here it is revealed in Paul’s desire to see their sorrow turn to joy and he has faith for it to happen. And by all accounts it does. The church flourishes, they exist with joy in Christ and the gospel goes forth.

So there are four marks here of a gospel-centered life and ministry. There is much to learn here about qualities of spiritual leadership, which is deeply needed in every level of church life, but it is not the marks that make it worth it. It is what remains at the center.

It is the thing, the person that drives the ministry, that extends the ultimate compassion, who is divinely confident in his work, who courageously serves those he loves.

It is from the Yes in Christ that Paul lives. It is from this same center that we can live.

2) The Gospel that Forms

Paul does his ministry, living with integrity because something is brighter than him.

2 Corinthians 1:20–22 “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. [21] And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, [22] and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. (ESV)

“Paul has moved from the Corinthians’ puzzlement about his travel plans to the very centre of the gospel and the hope it brings. This is quite deliberate. He doesn’t want the Corinthians to think of him, his travels and his forthcoming visit in purely human terms. He is anxious that they should learn to think of him, as they should learn to think of everything, in the light of God’s great Yes in the gospel and the spirit.” N.T. Wright

All of the history of redemption, the promise of salvation, of life. All of the longing of generations and the groaning of creation find their resolution in one place. Jesus.

That broken, sinful people could come before a holy God because someone has taken their punishment and given them his righteousness. This is the very good news at the center of Paul’s life and ours. It is his yes that we live from. With hope, with confidence, with courage, with love for one another.

“In Christ is the yes, the grand consummating affirmative, to all God’s promises. He is the horn of salvation raised up for us by God, “as He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets which have been since the world began” (Luke 2:44). The covenant promises addressed to Abraham and his seed are realized in His single person (Gal. 3:16). To the believer, therefore, Christ is all, not merely as fulfilling a word of the past, but as Himself being the very living Word of God, faithful and eternal. In Him all fullness dwells (Col. 1:19): wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption are to be found in Him alone (1 Cor. 1:30). There is nothing which is not in Him, who is the First and the Last, the Beginning and End (Rev. 22:13).” Philip Hughes

John 1:14 “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (ESV)

Ephesians 1:7 “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,” (ESV)

Romans 5:8 “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (ESV)

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (ESV)

All of the promises of God, given through the mouths of many prophets, at different times, and different places, they all converge like so many lines at one point, the Son of God who Paul proclaims. This Jesus, who is compassionate, confident, courageous, and caring.

And it is he who says, **John 10:9–11** “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. [10] The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. [11] I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (ESV)

That we may have life... and joy.

Can you forgive a Nebraska boy for talking about agriculture?! In 1940 farming in our country was radically changed, made to be more efficient and fruitful. All because of center pivot irrigation. The life source of the crops moved to the center of a field and distributed from there.

This is the Christian life with Christ as the center. It is where we experience flourishing, identity, purpose, real life. It is what forms us, the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for us and his ongoing help as we serve others. It is what drives Paul and what drives all of us who believe.

Not only are our lives proof but the presence of the Holy Spirit within us is a seal of ownership. Paul models this life of not being the center of not belonging to ourselves, and it is good. It is for the health and joy of the church.

It is meant to be ours in Christ. It is meant to reshape our lives and if you are for it, we can walk it out together.

A life centered on Jesus brings flourishing and lasting joy.

Hear the Yes - Believe in Jesus, let him set his seal on you and reorder your life. Yield to the true center of life. Repent of the ways you have rejected him and receive his grace, be renewed by it day by day.

Live so Others Can See - Let the gospel form you, that like Paul we can live different. Labor in community with one another, motivated by love, Christ's love for you and your love for each other. Extend grace to one another. Be confident in God's purpose for the church. And with courage fight for each other, against the schemes of the devil and the selfishness of a self-centered universe.

That we could say with Paul, **Acts 20:24** "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." (ESV)

We can only do these things because we are held by Jesus and because he already lived this in our place. We are now free to attempt it, for his glory.

When he is our center and we are nourished in his yes, the field flourishes. May we find our joy in him as we stand firm in his promise and power.