

*“Not Too Much to Bear”*

*Part 1*

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Today we begin our summer sermon series entitled ‘Not Too Much to Bear.’ There are 4 main Scriptures we will use as our foundation:

1. The prophet Jeremiah in 17:7,8 gives us this beautiful picture: *“But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”*
2. Matthew 22 gives us Jesus’ response to the question: *“Which is the greatest commandment?”* Let’s read it together: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ “*
3. Ephesians 4 is where we find the Apostle Paul teaching us that Christ himself is equipping the body of Christ, the church, for the work of service so that we may be built up, growing in maturity into the measure of the fullness of Christ. He says, *“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ.”*
4. Galatians 22 delivers the fruit of the Spirit, which is the theme for our Bible School next month, and which will be part of our pulpit teaching as well. Let’s read it together: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”*

Why this theme and these Scriptures for Summer 2019? Because we are living in a time of incredible unrest. There is so much incivility, i.e. rudeness, impoliteness, disrespect, coarseness, and vulgarity everywhere we go – and, in fact, you don’t have to literally ‘go’ anywhere to experience it – because it’s so much a part of social media. And it’s ruining people’s lives. It’s pushing the vulnerable to suicide. It’s granting us permission to say whatever pops into our sin-stained minds without first allowing the Holy Spirit to filter it. We as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, as ambassadors for Christ from the embassy of the Kingdom of God in the kingdoms of this world, we need tools to help us balance love and truth. Truth and love.

Some people, including many Christians, including many pastors I know completely ‘hold out the stop sign’ to an online life. They see Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. as nothing but a waste of time; some see them as evil. Listen, anything can be used for evil purposes. Even Satan took the Word of God and twisted it for his evil purposes. But many believe, and I do too, that this is an incredible time to be a Christian because a Wi-Fi connection has given us a larger megaphone than ever before to share our faith, to share where our hope comes from in times of trouble and sorrow, to encourage one another and build each other up. It is amazing to be able to message back and forth in an instant with our missionaries in Thailand, Lithuania, Argentina, and Mozambique! It is equally amazing to be able to send a text of encouragement to a student just starting college, or having their first day of work. I know for our children & youth, this is not astounding to you. You have always had this at your fingertips. But for the rest of us, it is amazing. The opportunities are astounding!

However, in mis-using and abusing social media outlets, the temptations and the opportunities to let loose the sins of the flesh into and as a result of social media posts are equally astounding and troubling. These abuses have always been in the culture, but I believe social

media has enhanced the size and attraction of the lure. Galatians 5:19-21 gives us quite a list (from The Message). You may hear the first few and quickly surmise that this list is not for or about you. Keep listening. *“Repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community.”* All of the above are alive and well, folks. Thriving, in fact. How much worse might it get for our children & youth?

I think we need to reinvigorate the vision God gave us 3 years ago when we wrote our mission, vision, and core values. Do you remember our vision statement? It is to **“ignite a deep-rooted passion for Christ in future generations.”** Our work is sitting all around us. Are you ready for a wake-up call?

The youngest generation in our country is quickly becoming the largest generation in our country. Generation ‘Z’ is the label for those born between 1999-2015. Other popular labels include ‘post millennials,’ the ‘app generation,’ the ‘selfie generation,’ ‘homelanders,’ and ‘iGen.’ I’m going with ‘Gen Z.’ Gen Z is projected to become the largest demographic group in the world, comprising 32% of the global population and is already the single largest media audience in the nation. We aren’t going to turn this ship around. Our call is to be ON the ship and influence, influence, influence by living and sharing God’s truth with love, and God’s love with truth.

Gen Z already is the least ‘religious’ of all generations in America. The percentage of teens who identify as atheist (that’s someone who says there is NO God), this percentage is double that of the US adult population (13% to 6%). (<https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.) The number of young people leaving the church over the past 20 years is shocking. According to one study at UCLA, 52% of college students said they went to church frequently the year before they went to college, but only 29% continued frequent attendance by their junior year. Other studies report that 50-70% of young Christians walk away from the church by the time they are in their college years. Even those who don’t leave find themselves struggling to believe Christianity is true.

Several weeks ago, I talked about doubt – about having doubts about our faith and about God from time to time. Certainly, over the course of an 80-year-old life, doubts have crept in, especially in times of deep, deep loss. Do we really think that every Christian mom or dad or sister or brother or young wife who lost a loved one on D-Day, and all the soldiers who saw the carnage, who crawled over their fallen comrades, or hid behind them trying to fulfill the mission, didn’t doubt in those times whether God existed, whether he was with them?

And now Gen Z, who since birth, have had access to 24-hour-news, videos, pictures of horrific things happening all over the world, who hear about another mass-shooting within minutes of it happening, who can be beat down, torn down, leveled by the words from a school-mate, maybe even a stranger, who can explore other religions with the push of a button – of course they struggle to believe, to hold onto their faith. Here are some of the reasons they are leaving the church:

- Some stuff is too far-fetched for me to believe.
- Too many questions that can’t be answered.
- I’m a scientist now, and I don’t believe in miracles.
- I’m doing a lot more learning, studying, and kind of making decisions myself rather than listening to someone else.
- Because I grew up and realized it was just a story like Santa or the Easter Bunny.
- I have a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world.

- I realized that religion is in complete contradiction with the rational and scientific world, and to continue to subscribe to a religion would be hypocritical.

Our culture, friends, 50 years ago, was a culture that encouraged faith and supported those who 'went to church.' Oh, you can find pockets of people who still encourage and support in this way, and you can even choose to live only in those pockets of people. But as a congregation, as a pastor of people of every generation, including many, many, many Generation Z's – we can't afford to live only in those pockets. Our kids, our students, they are not just 'going out there,' many of them because of technology, are already 'out there.'

A youth pastor asked a former youth now in junior college what he could have done differently to help instill an unshakeable faith in him. Was there something he could have done to motivate and prepare him? His response, "No. I simply wasn't there spiritually yet. I had to graduate and be challenged before I realized how important it is. But I was listening more than you probably think."

Truth plus love. Love plus truth. It includes the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but the Bible has a lot to say about our attitudes and our character, about how we talk to others, how we treat others, and how we conduct our lives. The truth is, and I say this with all the love I have, the truth is that many times we don't re-present Jesus very well, friends. Our language and our behavior is nothing that Jesus endorses. We are overriding the Holy Spirit with all the vim and vigor of an Olympian. And we hear it through the social media megaphone. Somehow we think just because we can, we will directly or indirectly attempt to tear others down with an ill-placed post.

I see these things all the time, and it hurts my heart. I see someone else posting something meant to tear down another person or 'type' of person, and I see other Christians 'liking' the post. Listen folks, if it is not something Jesus would say or do, there's nothing to like there. NOTHING. Don't ever think our Gen Z's aren't paying attention! They are paying attention in their own Gen Z kind of way.

We, as God's redeemed, are the people who have the best news to offer a world that is full of bad news. We are the people who are called to bear the fruit of the Spirit out into a world that is bearing the fruit of evil. Many of us have our souls fully settled and at peace with the truth of God's Word. Many of us know that though there are unanswered questions, we accept that that's part of the mystery and the miracle of faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

We must engage with one another. We must invest in one another. We must pray for one another. We must learn each other's names. We must listen, really listen, to one another. We must speak the truth in love to one another. Truth in love, because truth without love can be nothing but **noise**. We'll sound like a clanging cymbal to the world, pushing people away. But on the other hand, love without truth can turn to **wrongdoing**, can make us exactly what so many accuse us of being – hypocrites - saying we are one thing, but not living it out. Listen friends, **truth plus love** from us can lead to **influence**. Truth plus love equals influence for the Kingdom of God for every generation. We might not immediately see the impact or the results, but we trust God for the harvest. Amen?

How we need the Holy Spirit! How we need to be led and controlled by the Holy Spirit so that we can re-present Jesus well to one another, to all the Gen Z's among us and around us, and to a watching world! Graduates, we are proud of you. We know that sometimes the way was hard, but I dare say that it wasn't so much the schoolwork that was hard, but it was the personal stuff, the relationship stuff, that caused you to start counting down the days until you could finally be free from all the 'drama.'

Guess what? No matter where you're heading next, no matter where you are going this afternoon, the faces may be different, but the personal, relational challenges are still with you. All throughout the course of your lives, the personal, relational challenges are there. This is why it is so beautiful, so wonderful, and so magnificent that our God, the God we sing to and sing

about, is a personal, relational God. He loved us so much he came to us, he died for us, he rose in power for us, and he sent his Holy Spirit to live within us. Maybe you wonder if this is true, maybe the person beside you wonders if this is true, if this is really going to make a difference for you tomorrow, in August when you head off to school, or next year, or 5 years from now.

What I have known in my own life since I was 17 years old is that the road ahead is uncertain, but there is no uncertainty in Christ. Life itself, with all its sorrows and joys, twists and turns, is not too much to bear when I allow his truth and his love to flow into and out of me. I pray the same for you.

Please know that it is okay to have questions. It is more than okay to ask questions. And we want to learn to listen. Just listen without judgement. Listen with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Listen, then help you learn God's eternal truth. We want to help you be equipped to be a person who influences others in whatever setting you are in with the love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for your love. Thank you for your mercy. Thank you for your patience. Thank you for your rescue mission for us fulfilled in Jesus Christ the Lord. There is, indeed, so much we do not understand. We confess we have had doubts. We confess we have been afraid or ashamed to ask the questions that hound us in the night. We confess that we have not pursued truth, we have just waited to see how we felt in the moment. Forgive us for our lackadaisical ways. Forgive us for allowing fear to overrule our explorations. Forgive us not listening well to one another or to you. Forgive us for harnessing the Holy Spirit instead of allowing the Spirit to flow like a river from you, through us, to others. Forgive us for not forgiving others. Forgive us for harsh words, eyes of judgement instead of eyes of mercy. Forgive us, Father God, and restore to us the joy of your salvation. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Words of Assurance: God hears us. He loves us. And His Word tells us that when we confess our sins, because he is faithful and just, he forgives our sin and cleanses us from all (not some), but all unrighteousness. Receive his forgiveness, and come to the Table in peace. Amen.