

“Likemindedness in 2020”

Today I’ll be taking a break from 1 Corinthians. Don’t worry, we will jump back into 1 Corinthians next week, but the reason I’m taking a break from it today is for the purpose of taking a “spiritual” of our church. You know, like annual physicals for doctors, but we’re taking a “spiritual” and seeking to allow the Word of God inform us of how we’re doing as a church family.

A couple weeks ago, someone mentioned to me that they were listening to previous sermons of mine. They had made it to the New Year’s sermon for 2020, and they thought it was ironic and humorous that the title of my sermon was “No More Masks.” Wow, that prophecy failed, right? Or, did it? Obviously, I wasn’t talking about physical masks. The sermon was focused on church discipline and how a healthy church ought to be comprised of people consistently helping each other grow in the Lord. If that’s going to be the case, we must take our masks off so that people see us in our weaknesses and strengths. But, you know what? We have a nasty propensity to keep our masks on. We like the self-protection. We like to manage our lives according to our own standards, and when our masks begin to fall off (at least I know for me), I can want to put it right back on. I don’t want people to see the weakness of my life.

Thankfully, God is more resolute in for my godliness than even I am, and I believe he’s used the last few months to reveal our hearts and remove masks. In James 1 we read, “. . .**you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**”¹

What does “testing of your faith” mean? The word for “testing” is the same word for “temptation” in the Greek. It’s so interesting to me, but I think it helps us to understand a significant theological reality: Satan always seeks to tempt, but God seeks to test. And, when God tests, he’s not seeing if we’re going to get an A or an F. He tests in order to strengthen our faith. Now, what is faith? Faith isn’t believing despite the evidence. It’s not merely agreeing to information or reluctantly submitting to God. Faith is believing *and* depending on the Lord. In all trials, God’s is working in order to increase your clinging to the Lord. He wants to draw you closer and closer to him. However, Satan’s intention is to draw you away. Or, we could say, God’s intention is to take the mask off so you’ll look all-the-more to him for grace and strength. Satan wants you to keep the mask on so you think you’re fine and can do live in your own ability.

Personally, I would say that the last several months have been a trialsome and tempting season. Wouldn’t you agree? We’re still in the midst of it, too. Where we may want life to go back to normal, and we want church to go back, and we want people to just agree with us and stop debating with one another. And maybe some of you are like me and you just want everyone to “get along.” Yet, we must get our vision higher. God isn’t interested in going *back* to normal. He never goes backwards. His intention is trial, which leads you to cling to him more, which leads to greater maturity so that you are “perfect and complete.” That phrase refers to spiritual and physical wholeness.

Let me ask you some questions. In going through this season, do you feel more spiritually whole? Are you closer to the Lord through the Word and prayer? Does your behavior towards people reveal that?

¹ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jas 1:3–4.

What about your love for the world around you, your burden to evangelize? How about your love for fellow believers? Test yourselves. Has your clinging to God increased or have you drifted?

This is the concern of the elders currently. Most of our elders expressed at the last elder's meeting how burdened and discouraged they are right now. There are people who have been going back to old sins. People whose hearts have been revealed in concerning ways. There are others who are feeling confused with how to act and respond to various situations they're facing. In addition, social media adds a crazy mix to our lives that can be good, but also could be very bad. In all of this, the elders have experienced more divisive tendencies within our church family than ever before, and rather than ignore it and hope to subtly address it from sermon-to-sermon, I asked the others elders if they were ok with me taking a sermon to specifically address the elephant in the room (or, maybe the herd of elephants trampling through).

Now, I know that for some of you, you might be thinking, "I have no idea what you're talking about?!" And, if that's you, then I hope that this sermon serves you in helping you to know how to maintain the unity of the faith in the bond of peace. Others of you may understand some points I'm making, while other things, you may say, "I don't see that." In all of this, let's ask that the Lord convict us where we need convicting – and if we don't see what we need to see, that the Lord would open our eyes to his glory. As I say all of this, I'm reminded of practically every New Testament church the apostles address. They're consistently called to be likeminded. Each church faces their unique issues, and the apostles detail what likemindedness looks for them. So, think of this sermon as a "spiritual" directly related to our likemindedness. Therefore, the main idea of this sermon is: **Ventura must be likeminded for God's glory, our good, and the world's repentance.**

Ok, so before we get into each point, what does "likeminded" mean? Does it mean that every Christian agrees on every belief? For the last several weeks, during the benediction, we've heard from 2 Corinthians 13: agree with one another, live in peace. . .² It sounds like Paul's saying we must agree on everything, doesn't it? Then you read Philippians 2:1-2: **So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.**³ And what about Romans 12:16 that says "Live in harmony with one another," or when Paul writes in Philippians that Euodia and Syntyche must agree together in the Lord? All of these phrases have similar meanings, and I'm going to give a very basic definition of likemindedness from a Scriptural perspective: **Counting others as more significant than oneself because of the God-given union we have in Christ.**

Why do I put counting others as more significant as part of likemindedness? Because in Philippians 2, Paul goes on to describe being of one mind: **Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves. . .**⁴ Since the unity is given to us by Jesus, who sacrificed all for us, then that unity with one another is to be expressed as a

² The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 13:11.

³ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 2:1–2.

⁴ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 2:3–5.

sacrificial unity. Jesus not only sacrificed, but counted us as more significant than himself. Paul goes on to say Jesus went to the point of death on the cross! Ponder this again, Ventura. The One who never dies took on a human flesh and experienced death on the cross – not only death, but the wrath of God, which is the eternal death! He experienced this for myriads upon myriads of people on the cross. The One who was wholly righteous took humanity's unrighteousness. And, on the cross, he said, "Father, forgive them." If that were you, what do you think you'd say, "Father, get 'em"? Yet Jesus, in great love took the divine justice on himself so that God might be just in forgiving anyone who comes to him on the basis of Jesus. If you've experienced this love, then we are to treat others within the church the same way. So, Ventura, do you have any encouragement from Jesus? Do you find comfort in the love of God towards you? Do you have the Holy Spirit in you? If you have received these things, Paul says to fulfill his joy by living in the same mind with one another. Count others more significant because of the God-given union we have in Christ! This is likemindedness. And likemindedness is for God's glory, our good and the world's repentance. So, let's take each point. As we look at this, again I'll be testing this with our own church. How have we been with the spiritual mask removal? How are you/we with likemindedness in Ventura?

1. Ventura must be likeminded for God's glory.

Depending on how we relate to situations in life, we can either see more of God's glory or we can lose sight of God's glory. That's the difference between God's intentions and Satan's intentions. The Scriptures tell us we are created for God's glory and that in everything we do, we are to do it for the glory of God. Likemindedness is not merely a wish that God has for us that would be a good idea when possible, but it is commanded by the Lord as something that reveals we are living for his glory – not our own.

Think about this from a bigger perspective. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. With no needs for creation, he created all of this. If he didn't need it, why? Because he willed for a creation to be able to revel in his glorious majesty! God is so infinitely pure, holy, just, wondrous, glorious, that to know him is to know the treasure of eternity! Why would God do this when he had no need? Why would God bother with this? His very act of creation is sacrificial in creating us so that we could know him. Then God creates humanity to serve him and to rule together, pointing to his glory! But within what seems like a short amount of time, though, the first humans rebel against him by taking of the fruit. Even before taking the fruit, we know that Adam did not serve Eve. He didn't stop the serpent from his tempting. He didn't protect Eve. And Eve also didn't do her job in serving and protecting creation either. After Adam and Eve, we have witness after witness of a world that refuses to sacrifice for one another. Inevitably, there's injustice. From Lamech who declares his vengeance to the people at the time of Noah. Even the "good" examples are imperfect. We arrive with a nation of Israel, but they continue in sinful behaviors. Their judges and their kings. I'm reading about Solomon currently, and in the midst of his peaceful reign, he's getting peace at the expense of disobeying God's decrees in Deuteronomy 17 – to not accumulate wealth, horses and women. Therefore, the peace is only temporary and we're left longing for a King who will rule with grace and humility. We long for a society that will have true, lasting peace. Then comes Jesus. He's despised and rejected by men. He's a man of sorrows, and yet he is a man of amazing grace and love. He never took a political position. He never rose to status in the temple. Yet, here's a man who's changed more lives than any other figure in human.

He calls all who are weary in rebelling against God to come to him and they'll be reconciled to God. How? Through his sacrificial death on their behalf. Then, Jesus says that anyone who follows him must take up their cross, deny themselves and follow him. Listen, that's not how you gain a following, right? Take up your death device! Deny yourself like Jesus denied himself. Why live this way? Because God has created people to mirror his glory to this world – his sacrificial glory. When we live this way, we reveal our Triune's glory is superior. We reveal Jesus is most glorious. In John 17, Jesus prays this: **The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one. . .**⁵ This glory is revealed as we live out the unity in Christ. In our unity we reveal a profound divine love.

So, question, do you care about God's glory? You can say yes, but what about your Bible reading? What about prayer? What about your obedience to God's Word? This past week, Cody Boerema shared with me a quote from an old Puritan who said that many Christians have spiritual buhlemia. They take in a lot of knowledge, but they don't digest it. They're dying because they don't take God and his Word seriously. Do you give lip-service to God's glory or do you submit to God's glory, taking up the cross, denying self and loving others sacrificially? Do you read about loving one another and loving your neighbor, but on Facebook you're about elevating you? What about your mindset towards neighbors and friends and church family? Is there spiritual "buhlemia"?

How's your "spiritual" going? Is God showing you areas he wants to redeem even more? In a fallen, sin-cursed world, we reveal his glory through dying to ourselves and esteeming others as more significant than ourselves. So, think of it this way. Is God seen as *most* glorious when we only get along with people who agree with us? Or, is he seen as most glorious when you love and serve people *when* they disagree with you? You know the answer right? When we live this way, we reveal to others that God's glory is of greater worth than anything. Why dishonor the King, like Adam and Eve – and the rest of creation – when Jesus has set me free to live for his glory? Behold the glory of God, do not take him lightly. Worship him and the outflow will be to love others. And, this leads to the next two points:

2. Ventura must be likeminded for our own good.

I've already read passages to churches regarding being of the same mind, being likeminded, having the mind of Christ, and being unified. So, what I want to do here is give both positive examples and also general examples of concern for us as a church in the midst of this time. Like Paul, I want to say, "And such were some of you." Meaning, if you're a Christian, then when you hear things that you're doing that are sinful, repent and find greater conformity to Christ. If you already see God working in you as you listen to these points, then praise Jesus he's growing you. Either way, may we all grow in our dependence on the Lord Jesus.

Let's start by seeing how a lack of likemindedness is not for our good. Currently, in all transparency, I don't personally like the model we have of services. That doesn't mean I don't believe it the wisest at this point in time, but I don't like it. But I don't like it because I feel it can lead to separating believers from one another. At least some of the elders have had discussions with people over the masks or no-masks perspective, and what people often want to do is get into a political or conspiracy discussion as a defense for why they ought to have no masks. If the conversation goes to people who need to wear masks because they are actually immuno-compromised, the discussion at least feels like this: I get some people need to do this, but I don't. So, what's the solution? All who are immuno-compromised or those

⁵ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 17:22.

who have a concern for them can worship in a different service. In other discussions, it feels like people are more politically charged and want to blame people of being rebels to America by choosing masks. Please know there are people who genuinely feel something like this. Yet, I know the flipside can happen as well, right? "You don't wear a mask? You must be a fool and you don't care about people whatsoever, and clearly I don't want to be lumped into the type of Christianity you believe or affirm."

Do you know what concerns me about all of this? In Jesus' sermon on the mount, he said that if you call your brother "Raca," meaning, "you fool," you're in danger of hell. Does Jesus not mean these words? Sadly, I think within this shelter-at-home time, we've spent less time talking with people and we've spent more time treating people as though their value is based in their positions. Whereas James says that all humans are created in the image of God and therefore, we must treat them accordingly. Let's not be like Lamech or the Judges in Israel, but like Christ who sacrificed always. And this ought to be the case even more for the church.

Recently, I was talking to a church member who's part of a social group. She said that she goes out with the members of the group after their gatherings and they can talk about anything and they're still great with each other. I went on to comment on this, saying that it's intriguing to me that these community groups can maintain unity over various religious and political differences, yet in the church it can often feel like our unity is threatened by various views. Yet the Bible teaches us that Christian unity is stronger than any other kind of unity. But does it feel that way to you?

This has led me and some other elders to begin asking ourselves how we ought to encourage greater growth within our church family. And one of the areas is with regards to our communication and sharpening of each other. Whether it's over email, phone, personal interactions, social media, many elders have had very concerning (or heard of) conversations with people in our church family. And, I've experienced conversations that essentially boil down to people saying, "But why do I have to sacrifice?" First, you don't *have* to. You get to! Jesus set you free to do so. Second, you get to because this is the command of God to shine forth his glory! If that means wearing a masks for the *many* immunocompromised people in our church or whether that's sitting in a certain service time, you get to! We get to do this together. But sacrifice becomes extremely difficult when we raise our positions above people. This is what I think is the crux of the matter. My positions can blind me to your humanity and also blind me to the fact that you are my brother or sister in Christ. How often Paul reminds the churches that they are compromised of people for whom Christ died. Or, James when he reminds us that we're made in the image of God. This doesn't mean positions don't matter, but if we have no love for one another, then what good are our positions? And, if we don't sacrifice like Christ, are we really comforted in the love of God? Actually, I think we're probably following Satan instead. I just learned this this past week that the word for "slanderer" is the Greek word "diabolos." Do you know what that Greek word also means? Devil. The devil unjustly condemns believers, and we can do that, too. All believers were paid for by Christ's blood – yet we can slander or condemn or put them away from us? Does God ever put his children away? No! May we signify that by our acceptance and love.

So, what can we do about this? Over the last month and a half, I've been more proactive reaching out to people that I may or may not agree with (within the church) to sharpen our relationships. I'm not trying to impale them with my view, but to listen to them, learn from them and then to challenge them with the things that challenge me. I've been blessed by this because I'm not threatened that we'll separate from each other. Instead, we pray that God will grow us and challenge us. A few weeks ago, I was talking

with a member of our church, stating my concern that Christians are losing sight of Jesus and focusing more on political stances than evangelism. After some communication this person conceded that the Lord revealed to them their passion may be distorted – focusing more on politics than proclaiming Christ.

This type of communication should be happening more in the church. We shouldn't be afraid that we're going to "tattle" on each other or gossip about one another or take one another to mental courtrooms. Instead, may we grow in esteeming one another more highly than ourselves! If we do this, there will be less personal offense taken and maybe together we'll sacrifice for each other. We'll learn the next steps we need to take in the midst of COVID-19 and whatever else comes our way because we're loving each other. Let's do better than community organizations. Let's not say, "Well, if you believe that, then you do that thing over there and I'll do this thing." Or, "I'll come back when everything is done in a way I personally prefer." No. Let's pray to the Lord for what sacrifice looks like so we can truly *love* one another.

As I think of the fighter passage this past week, Paul says that we are to do good to everyone. This leads me to the final point.

3. Ventura must be likeminded for the world's repentance.

In John 17, Jesus also prays, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."⁶ Jesus gives illustrations in his sermon on the mount that we together are the light of the world and salt to this earth. Then Paul states in 2 Timothy 2:25, ". . . **correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.**"⁷ I have never found one instance in the Bible where Jesus or the apostles are rude to the world. With the Pharisees, Jesus is firm and even righteously angry, but they are religious leaders. No New Testament saint seems anything but gentle. Yet, in the midst of this time period, the elders (including me) have been quite burdened by the testimony of Christians to this world. Whether it's namecalling a political opponent or demeaning individuals who hold different positions than you do, my concern is, "What about Jesus? What about the person knowing Christ?"

About a month ago, God hit me between the eyes while I was thinking about all the various issues hitting us in America and around the world, and a thought came to me: Satan is happy as long as Jesus isn't central. I was getting caught up in argumentation first, and Jesus was put in the corner. Listen, if Jesus isn't central, then God's glory isn't my aim because God's glory is seen in Jesus!

So, here's a good question to ask yourself, "If you were a missionary in another country, how would you talk or act?" You might say, "That's different because this is my home!" But what about Peter's words to the Christians who were under persecution in the Roman government (which was their home)? He called them sojourners and exiles. Far better for us to show people that there's a greater homeland than to fight for this one. I'm not saying that you cannot care about this government. Jeremiah says to the

⁶ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 17:20–21.

⁷ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Ti 2:25–26.

exiled Israel that they are to seek the welfare of the city they've been called into exile. But we also *must* recognize that seeking the welfare is seeking their eternal welfare! As a result, we have a command to be gentle. Name-calling doesn't save anyone.

Our prayer is for people's repentance and that they'd be set free from the devil, right?! My judgment doesn't matter. In the end, all unbelievers are going to a Christless eternity in Hell if God does not show mercy on them. And, as a result, God commands you and me to be gentle. May our testimony as a church be one of gentleness to outsiders.

So, what does this look like for us? Engaging the world around us? Interesting that in all the points I've made, the application is to directly relate. Directly go to God through the Word and prayer. Directly interact with people in the church. Directly talk to people of this world. I fear that social media has further idolated ourselves from individuals - treating them as positions not image-bearers. Befriend and listen to unbelievers. And together, as a church, may we care for their souls. If we are that city on a hill, and salt in the world. If we are gentle *together*, God may draw more people to himself. As a result, there's more people who's hearts and lives are changed, which will influence our church family for greater growth and also our society – all until the day we see God face-to-face and his glory covers the face of the earth.

So, Ventura, where are you today? How's your mask? Has God been revealing sin? Is God helping you to see how we can live for God's glory together. **Where do we begin? God's glory in Christ as revealed in the Word and sought through prayer. Then living our commitment to one another (and seeking to sharpen each other). Finally, revealing the death-to-self love to the world. May God grace us to repent and grow.**