

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Scott Sauls
Loving “The Other” in an Age of Outrage**

Well, good morning everybody! My name is Scott and I bring greetings to you from CPC South, or the fake CPC as it has been affectionately referred to by your pastor. It's my privilege to be here with you to talk a little bit about what we could call “the active expression of the grace of Jesus Christ across the lines of difference”. What I would like to do is start by steering our attention to a short text from the Bible. This is from 1 Timothy chapter 6, verses 3-5:

³ If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, ⁴ he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, ⁵ and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.
[1 Timothy 6:3-5. ESV]

So, this is God's word, and I think we are probably all agreed that we live in, what at least feels to many of us, like an unprecedented climate of outrage, of hostility, of us against them, of picking sides, of demonizing others while sort of tribalizing in our echo chambers with people who think and talk and speak and vote like we do. There is a New York Times writer named Tim Kreider who talks about this, and he says that we seem to be in a strange season where everybody is looking actively for something to be offended by. There is something in us that loves to feel like we are right, and we also love to feel like we have been wronged—by the system, by certain people groups, etc. We love that victim identity because it positions us to feel like it's okay to judge and to punish. That's the climate we are in.

And so, thinking about and contemplating this climate of outrage, Emma Green wrote an essay not too long ago in *The Atlantic* and the title of that essay was “Taming Christian Rage”. Her theory was that Christians, rather than being a solution to the problem, or antidote to the problem, or something countercultural that looks different from the world, based on her observations, Christians are just as much a part of the problem and are contributors to it. So, what I want to do is advocate for something more countercultural today. I want to advocate for something different coming out of the church of Jesus Christ. I actually think that now is a time, maybe the most opportune time in my lifetime, for the people of Jesus to step out into the world—into the places where we live and work and play, and also into our churches—and express something different than what we are seeing and experiencing, refusing to become part of the

madness, refusing to become disciples of the culture of outrage, and instead to be disciples of the One who loved and gave Himself for us while we were still His enemies. To be discipled by Jesus, not by the culture.

Interesting, perplexing that the apostle Paul, writing to a pastor—young Timothy—talks about a couple of dynamics. There is the us-against-us dynamic that we need to contend with, there's the us-against-them dynamic, and then there is God against God which provides the basis for something different. But us-against-us...did you notice in verse five, he talks not simply about the presence of controversy and quarrels in this church body that he is writing about, he talks about how there is craving for controversy and quarrels...and constant friction. Can you imagine this dynamic in a church of all places? And yet even in a church, especially in a church, Paul is pointing out this self-victimizing impulse to judge and punish, always on the lookout for something to be offended by, loving to feel like we are right and somebody else is wrong, loving to feel like the problem with the world is out there rather than turning 180 degrees for a more honest perspective. The real problem with the world is inside of me, not outside of me, and Jesus came to take care of that. But Paul is talking about sibling discord that is actually happening between people who should know better because they are all collectively together daughters and sons of God. They are all collectively together the bride of Jesus Christ. And I'll tell you this, if you make enemies with my wife, you make enemies with me. We are no longer friends if you insult my wife and you disrespect and disregard her and write her off—don't expect to get chummy with me. And I think Jesus was saying the same thing. Don't expect to get chummy with Me as you dis the people that I love. And so, here's an example. It's more subtle, but it's in play. I think it's fair game to talk about it in the climate that we're in right now. So, this was several years ago; it was during a Presidential election cycle and everybody was nervous about who would be the next person to occupy the Oval Office. Everybody was either afraid of losing something or excited about gaining something new, and this gentleman in our church comes up to me after the service and says, "Pastor, you're not going to believe the conversation we had in my small group Bible study last week." And I said, "I bet I will believe it, try me." I don't know where Pastor John is, but we pastors will tell you that, especially after being at it for a couple of decades, you probably can't surprise us with anything by this time, and this didn't surprise me. He said there was a woman who—during the time when they were sharing things they are hopeful about and things that are troubling them—this woman said, "You guys, here's something to be really excited about. Did you guys know that there are all kinds of non-Christians who are coming to our church on a regular basis to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ?" And someone said, "Oh, tell me about it. Who did you meet? Who did you talk to?" And the woman said, "Well, I haven't met anybody or talked to anybody, but haven't you noticed all the bumper stickers in the parking lot supporting the other side in this election?" So, to be a Democrat is to not be a Christian, or to be a Republican is to not be Christian. I mean isn't it interesting...I would imagine that the majority of you vote the same way. You come from a very similar life experience, very similar climate, probably very similar job situation and experiences of life, so probably you favor a certain political persuasion that

favors and strengthens people like you. But you can drive ten or fifteen miles away from here and find another church this morning that faithfully believes every word of the Bible, that has given its heart to Jesus as a community, who is on the complete opposite side of the political continuum as maybe the majority would be in this community. And it does beg the question in this encounter with the man at our church: if I feel more kindred with, if I have more affinity and affection for those who share my politics but not my faith, than I do with those who share my faith but not my politics, am I really with Jesus? Or have I just coopted my partisan leanings into this thing I falsely call Christianity?

Did you know that the little tribe of twelve that Jesus selected as His disciples included Simon—who was a zealot, an anti-government zealot...the less government the better, maybe even the modern-day equivalent would be a Libertarian, little bit right of the Republicans—and Matthew, who was not only a tax collector but a chief tax collector, a big government guy. They were both in the tribe together, walking together, suffering together, ultimately dying together as brothers, alongside and under Jesus. Matthew and Simon. We have no indication in the Bible that either one of them left their political persuasion, and yet we have every indication that they walked together as brothers—that they agreed together that the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world. Not of this world. How about that? And how about the fact that there was one, just one gospel writer, one of the four who highlighted the fact that Simon the zealot and Matthew the chief tax collector were both among the twelve, and...you guessed it...it was Matthew himself. You know, this gentleman who came up to me about this conversation in his small group said, “You know, I didn’t have the heart to tell the rest of the group that one of those cars with one of those bumper stickers was mine. Here’s the beautiful thing about the Gospel: the Gospel is a message of reconciliation. Ephesians 2 talks about how the dividing wall has been torn down between heaven and earth, between a holy God and a sinful humanity; the dividing walls are down. There is complete access; there’s a full embrace from the God who should be completely offended by virtually everything about us, because everything about us is tainted by sin and enmity toward God and independence and all of those things that got us in trouble in the Garden of Eden. We still carry those things with us, and yet God has chosen to redirect His legitimate anger, His legitimate outrage toward sin, away from us toward Jesus on the cross where it was all taken care of, moving our judgement day from the future to the past, so that all that is left for us is a father who says *welcome into My embrace...and by the way, this means you have to start opening your arms to one another as well.*

You see this in David and Jonathan...sociopolitical differences, economic differences, etc. David is the son of a shepherd, Jonathan is the son of a king—he’s a prince—and this is one of the most beautiful, committed friendships that’s ever been written about between these two young men. In Galatians 3 it says, “In Christ there is no longer male and female” blowing apart any sort of gender division that existed.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no **male and female**, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. [Galatians 3:28]

This was a very misogynistic culture. There could have been a #metoo movement back then. Women were treated as second class...weren't even allowed to vote. Their testimony in court was invalid, was delegitimized...*who can trust a woman?* Jesus says, "No. And in fact I'm going to choose a woman to be the first eyewitness of my resurrection. I'm going to elevate women." To help you understand, in the image of God He created them—male and female. He created them. See, this isn't anything new. We are getting back to what has always been true—in Christ, those divisions are obliterated. No more Jew and Gentile—that speaks to ethnic divisions, that speaks to political divisions, that speaks to moral differences, ethical differences, ideological differences, religious differences, breaks down any sort of nationalistic leanings anybody might have—those differences don't exist anymore in Christ. No slave or free. Jesus represents the end of oppression. The end of exploiting people, of paying them less than what they are worth because you can. It's the end of all of that. No more slave, no more free; all are one in Christ.

Paul begins so many of his letters by using these words as his salutation: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Do you understand the significance of the language there? "Grace to you" was how Gentiles began their letters. "Peace to you" was how Jewish people began their letters. It's as if he is saying: "Trump and Obama to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." "Liberal and conservative to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." "Affluent and poor, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." "Red and yellow and black and white to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

See, here's the power of the Gospel. It's given to us in part to help us overcome every kind of partisan attitude. A partisan attitude is not Christian. It's not. Jesus is way more conservative than a Republican would be. Every single dot and scratch of the law of God will be fulfilled. And He's way more liberal than a far leaning leftward progressive—giving leadership to women, touching lepers, welcoming excommunicated sinners and eating with them. See? He doesn't fit your box; He doesn't fit your category. And if you've got Him in a box, you might not have Him. The Gospel will lead us to overcome partisan attitudes. It will help to expand our definition and understanding of what "us" means and to narrow our definition and understanding of what "them" means. So, no more us-against-us, especially inside the body of Christ. He's not just talking about our local church, He's talking about the global communion of the saints. Every nation, every tribe, every tongue, from every persuasion. But then there is the us-against-them piece that the scriptures speak so forcefully about. You know, to qualify as a leader, to be qualified as a leader in the church of Jesus Christ, you have to have non-Christian friends who like you, who want to be like you, who would tell their closest friend that you are one of their closest friends. It's right there, earlier in this letter, the elder has to have a good reputation with those who are outside of the faith. Acts chapter two talks about

how the quality of the community and contribution to the cities that the Christians were making was so robust, so...*what is going on in this community over here that they would bring such life to our cities?* It says in Acts chapter two that the Christians enjoyed the favor of all the people. *Yeah, their beliefs are kind of weird...virgin birth, dude walking on water, guy coming up from the dead...I mean, come on. But man, they can love well. Maybe there's something to this. Maybe the miracle of how well they love their enemies makes a miracle like a virgin birth not seem so far-fetched after all.*

Luke chapter fifteen, verse one—Jesus is welcoming sinners, eating with them. He is so guilty by association that He is accused, falsely accused, of being a glutton and a drunk. Not because He was a glutton and not because He was a drunk, but because He went to the bars and spent time there. And He ate at the glutton's feasts. I don't think there is any record in the New Testament of Jesus turning down an invitation to a party. You know, there is the grand party that He talks about in the parable of the two lost sons and the recklessly loving father in Luke chapter fifteen, but then there is also the party that is thrown and hosted by a Pharisee in Luke chapter seven. The whole purpose of the party was to insult Jesus and to insult somebody that Jesus loves. He still went, and He taught, and He ate and drank there. He welcomed any kind of person. Here's the thing: this invitation from God to just be a kindhearted person, and to start there as our baseline of engagement with other people, to extend kindness just as God has extended kindness to us in Christ...this little invitation right here completely contradicts, is completely countercultural to the culture of outrage in that day and age. A Pharisee prays this prayer in Luke chapter eighteen:

¹¹ 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'
[Luke 18:11-12]

Good for you, go to hell is what Jesus said. This man did not go home justified, Jesus says. Who goes home justified in the sight of God? The tax collector over here who just got insulted by the Pharisee who is praying, "Have mercy on me, oh God, the sinner."

You know, few things corrupt the Christian witness more in the world than Christians who scold. How many times have you heard the story *I fell in love with Jesus because a Christian, or a group of Christians, lectured me about my morals and my ethics?* It's a serious question. I've been in ordained ministry for almost twenty years; I've been a Christian for about twenty-eight years and I've never met a single person with that story. I've met tens of thousands of people who identify as followers of Jesus, and not a single one of them has told me that that is their story. You know, Tim Keller, who has had a profound influence on me and who I am thankful to call a friend, talks about healthy tolerance. He says, "Healthy tolerance, tolerance that comes from God in other words, is not about not having convictions. Of course you are going to have convictions...we're people of the Book. We live by every word that has proceeded from the mouth of God. The scriptures are non-negotiable for the people of God." Of course we have convictions, but here's what He says, "Healthy tolerance that comes from God is about

how your convictions lead you to treat people who disagree with you.” And Keller would argue, as I think the Bible argues, that it’s not in spite of our Biblical and Christian convictions that we love people who might not necessarily love us back...it’s not in spite of our convictions but because of our convictions about Jesus...that we would think such crazy things about what it means creatively to love those that the Bible calls enemies, specifically those who don’t love us, those who feel threatened by the movement of Jesus and want to put the movement of Jesus down as a result.

The Huffington Post came out with this essay not too long ago and you can Google it if you want to write the title down; it’s out there and it’s very much worth reading. It’s called “Six Tips for Christians Talking to Non-Christians.” It’s written by a student Chaplin from Harvard, and in that essay he says these words:

“The divide between Christians and atheists in particular is deep. I am dedicated bridging that divide, to working with atheists, Christians, and people of all different beliefs and backgrounds on building a more cooperative world. We have a lot of work to do. My hope is to help foster better dialogue between Christians and atheists, and that together we can work to see a world in which people are able to have honest, challenging, and loving conversations across the lines of difference.”

So, this Harvard Chaplin’s name is Chris Steadman, who identifies as queer and atheist. He was the Chaplin of Harvard’s secular Humanist Society, and he’s moved over to Yale University to occupy the same position there, the point being this: if God can’t find any Christians who will stand up and say patently Christian things like this, He will raise up somebody who doesn’t even believe in His existence to say these things. He doesn’t need us to say these things and to herald these things out into the world that He created. He’ll make sure somebody says it, but why wouldn’t it be us? We’re the ones who have a reason to believe and live this way because of the One who loved us and gave Himself for us while we were still enemies, while we were still opposed to Him.

This is an invitation to freedom by the way. I mean, isn’t it attractive to you—the thought that God would actually want you to default to being nice to people instead of mean, to move toward people—instead of creating distance because *I am with God* (what God are you with if that is your posture?) to move toward a world that doesn’t agree with you on the most sacred things? Who is your God? It’s not this one. Here’s an invitation from Jesus himself to everyone who claims to be His followers. What if your life became about inviting people to belong with you before they believed with you? What if your life became about offering an embrace and welcome and hospitality to people before they agree with you on things like God and Jesus and scripture, and whether they ever agree with you on things like God and Jesus and scripture or not? What a wonderful invitation. In Hebrews it is put this way: “As far as it depends on you, be at peace with every single person.” As far as it depends on you. If you watched the movie “Wonder” you may remember the closing remark: “Be kind, because every person you meet is fighting a hard, hidden battle.” Start there. Start there.

Remember Jesus with the rich ruler? You know, Jesus offers him life and he says *I'm going to show you true wealth if you will come follow me*. And says the man, because he loved his wealth more than he loved Jesus—and you can't simultaneously be in love with your money and be in love with Jesus, and if you think you can love both you are fooling yourself—he said *this is a little bit too much for me* and he walked the other way. But in the context of that man leaving and saying no to the invitation that Christ was offering to him to come and actually live, *come and be part of my tribe*, the man walks the other way, and two little details can be easily missed: it says there that Jesus looked at him and loved him. It doesn't say that Jesus scolded him, it doesn't say that Jesus leaned in to his buddies and started gossiping about the man that was walking the other way, it says that Jesus looked at him and loved him. It also says that when the man walked away he did not feel judged and punished. He didn't feel like he had been read the riot act or been preached at by some Pollyanna preacher on a pedestal. It says that he walked away sad. Maybe there was a little bit of FOMO going on there, a little bit of fear of missing out, like *what am I walking away from?* Maybe he's having second thoughts, because why else would he be walking away sad after this encounter with Jesus?

So, I said to the earlier services, I know it's probably a little narcissistic to quote your own book, but I was asked to speak on the themes from *Jesus Outside the Lines*, and so I'll just give you a little quote. It's sort of a summary statement, so you don't even have to read the book. I'm giving you an opportunity not even to read the book because this is really what the whole book is about in a nutshell:

“What matters more to us, that we successfully put others in their place, or that we are known to love well? That we win culture wars with carefully constructed arguments and political power plays, or that we win hearts with humility, truth, and love? God have mercy on us if we do not love well because all that matters to us is being right and winning arguments. Truth and love can go together. Truth and love must go together.”

Another way you can say this is that the more conservative we are in our belief that every single word of the Old and New Testaments are true, the more conservative we are in our belief that everything the Bible says about Jesus is true, the more fiercely liberal we will be in the way that we love the people that God has created, the more truly we will walk the narrow path that Jesus established for us, and the more fiercely broad our embrace is going to become. You see? It's crazy. Jesus leans hard right and He leans hard left, both at the same time. Who's He with? It's like the commander of the Lord's army...the angel of the Lord comes and says, “Are you with us or are you with our enemies?” And the answer is, “Nope.” Wrong question. The question is, “Are you with Me?” Because if you're with Me, you're going to be with one who transcends all of your categories and all of your partisan holes and the ditches that you dig for yourself and other people.

God against God, that's what made this all possible. Once more, it was the outrage, the legitimate outrage of God the Father towards sin that came in and wrecked the universe that He created and the people that are part of it, and the animals and the sky and the water...everything got wrecked when human beings decided to try out being independent from God. It all got trashed, wrecked, cursed. And in case we are troubled by the association of words like "anger" with God—I mean, you think about it—the only time you ever get angry is because something you love has either been threatened or it's been taken away from you or bullied. Sin has acted somewhat like a bully and like a thief with the people and places and things that God has created. It's a protective anger just as much as it is a punitive anger. He got angry both to punish our sin, by punishing Jesus so He would never have to punish us, and to protect us from the wages of sin that should have been ours. See? God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Or as Isaiah puts it, He came and was despised and rejected. He was pierced for our transgressions, and the punishment that brought us peace with God was laid upon Him, so that we the offenders could be regarded forevermore as the daughters and sons, and as the bride. [Paraphrase of Isaiah 53:4-8]

Last thought here before we go to prayer. We were His "them" if you ever had a them. I want to put something in front of you; I'm going to ask you to go home and think about it, and it's this: America is not—never has been, never will be—the center of the Christian story. Did you know that? Did you know that Jesus never spoke or heard a word of English? Did you know that Jesus was not white? In all likelihood He had brown skin. Did you know that Jesus hails from the Middle East, and not from Missouri or Nashville or California? He hails from the Middle East. Did you know that He was a Middle Eastern refugee? Not too far away from Syria and Iraq and Afghanistan...all of these other Aramaic and Arabic speaking countries, and of course Jerusalem and Judah and Samaria and such. Did you know that? Did you know that He was poor all of His life, materially poor? Did you know that He was blue collar, not white collar? Did you know that He spent a good part of His adult years homeless? Did you know that? Why would He think about us? Why would He care about us? It sort of takes my mind to the eighth psalm...I don't know about you, but where David said, when he looks at the galaxies, "What is man that you should think of him and desire him. Who am I?" [Paraphrase of Psalm 8:4] And in a sense, when we look at where Jesus hails from, we should ask, *why in the world would You think of us? Who are we?* And His response to that is the Great Commission:

I want you to go into Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, and then I want you to go all the way to the ends of the earth, to people that you have never heard of or thought of and bring them the Gospel because they are just as much part of us as the Father and the Holy Spirit are part of me.
[Paraphrase of Matthew 28:19-20]

You see? What a wonderful thing, that Jesus had no earthly reason to even think of us, let alone come all the way over here to rescue us and to draw us into His family and to give us the spirit of adoption as daughters and sons. Except He did. And if this reality doesn't transform us into the people of peace that He has called us to be, I'm not sure what will. Let's be countercultural, shall we?

Let's close our time with a prayer from a Roman Catholic named Saint Francis. Let's pray together:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.