

# ***“My One Sermon”***

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

**Corinth Reformed Church**  
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW  
Hickory, North Carolina 28601  
828.328.6196 [corinthtoday.org](http://corinthtoday.org)

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

***The cross of Jesus is for you, but it isn't about you.***

***Habakkuk 2:12-14; Philippians 2:1-11***

***September 17, 2023***

## ***Connections***

I've heard for years that every pastor only has one sermon – variations on one theme. Today seemed like the right time to preach my one sermon.

My preaching has changed across 30 years. In the 90s, I often started sermons with a joke. The late Claude Abernethy's favorite was about a man who was told by God he could bring one suitcase to heaven. He liquidated all his assets, bought gold bullion, and packed it in a suitcase. When he arrived at the pearly gates, Peter asked him what was in his bag. Proudly, the man said, "God gave me permission to bring one suitcase, and I filled it full of gold. Peter said, "With all your choices, you brought pavement?"

People in the 90s thought my jokes were funny. I thought I was funny. Then Paul Cummings came along and the standard for humor rose higher. Or, sometimes lower. Paul's naturally funny and has never told a "joke" in a sermon. My colleagues have challenged me to think through not only what I preach but how I preach.

To find my one sermon, I needed help. I asked Patter Cross to collate 30 years of sermon manuscripts into three documents, about a decade each. Then I asked Joey Osborne, a newcomer to Corinth who has taught me almost everything I know about ChatGPT (which isn't much!), to ask the Artificial Intelligence program to summarize all my sermons by decade and then come up with a single summary paragraph. I'll share that with you at the end of the sermon. Pastor Amy has posted these sermon documents at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons).

Before you say, "I'm going to read them all!" you need to know that my sermon manuscripts total almost 3.5 million words, not including funerals, weddings, or the

place my staff will tell you I used the most words: staff agendas. That's about 4.5 times as many words as there are in the Bible.

I had another challenge preparing for my one sermon. Twenty years ago Pastor Paul noted that I always feel the compelled to integrate the Bible, current events, the church or national calendar, and my personal life into each sermon. Two weeks ago the sermon was on Genesis 1-2 but included Labor Day, our new house in Leland, and my recent colon surgery.

Today, I needed to connect the Scripture I had chosen for my one sermon, Philippians 2, with our sermon series (Jesus in the Old Testament). But there are also themes like retirement, gratitude, and family. Paul mentioned the Sunday after 9-11 brought large crowds to church. Like the Athenians who built an altar TO THE UNKNOWN GOD, I wanted to make sure I didn't miss anything important, so I looked up September 17 on [nationalday.com](http://nationalday.com).

Who knew that September 17 is [National Pet Bird Day](#)? We have a day to celebrate caged animals that God created to fly?

September 17 is also [National Wife Appreciation Day](#). Linda, you've listened to more of those 3.5 million words than anyone else. You're my best friend, my favorite Corinth staff member, and I can't wait to retire with you because you're still hot.

September 17 is also [National Bobby Day](#). That's a thing. Look it up. The only people I still know who ever knew me as Bobby are here on the front row. People named Bobby get a holiday because they're so friendly. They love connections. My one sermon is about connections. Philippians 2 is about connections.

### ***Jesus (Philippians 2:6-8)***

My one sermon has to focus on Jesus. You may think that's a no brainer, but it isn't always true in churches. All Christian churches believe in the Trinity, but often focus on one Person of the Trinity more than the others. There are God-churches, Jesus-churches, and Spirit- churches.

Corinth was a God-church when I came. In the 1990s people would say, "The new pastor is OK, but he talks about Jesus a lot." Yes, I have. My sermon manuscripts mentioned God 27,035 times; Jesus or Christ 31,358 times; Spirit 4,564 times. I don't think the Holy Spirit is offended. His role is to glorify the Father and Son.

What is it about Jesus? The early Christian hymn Paul wrote or quoted in Philippians 2 is a hymn about Jesus. He focuses on who Jesus is – "equality with God" and "made in human likeness, and what he did – "death on a cross."

Last Sunday I was talking to one of my newest pastor friends, who soon might become one of your newest friends too. During our phone call he asked me what book I

might recommend. I said I was planning to mention John Stott's *The Cross of Christ* and Tom Holland's *Dominion* in this sermon. He had read both books, and asked me if I had heard the podcast featuring Tom Holland and N. T. (Tom) Wright on how St. Paul changed the world. Tom Wright wrote *Paul: A Biography* in 2018.

All three authors said the message of the cross changed the world. Few people, even Christians, grasp why. We've Americanized Jesus' crucifixion, turning it into one more basis for individualism. "God loved *me* so much," we think and say, "that he even died for *me*." That's true, but it's not the central message of the New Testament. I suggest this focus on God being all about *me* is precisely why we get so disappointed with God. If God did not spare his own Son for me, why did I lose my job? Why was my prayer not answered? Why am I not being healed? This Jesus thing must not be true.

Notice in the verses I just read from Philippians 2, there is no "me" in there. In this particular text there isn't even a mention of forgiveness or grace or atonement. In this moment, for the Philippians, Paul's focus is elsewhere, and it's consistent with the rest of the New Testament. The cross of Jesus is for you, but it isn't about you. "For God so loved the *world* that he gave his one and only Son" (emphasis added).

Romans believed you change the world with force. Every free male had absolute power over his household – his wife, his children, and his slaves. This power included the power of life and death. He could abuse or kill members of his household without being held accountable. His power included the right to have sex with anyone he wanted in any way he chose. The only limit to his power was the hierarchical chain of other free Roman men, and the zenith of that hierarchy was Caesar who was worshiped as a god and had absolute power over everyone. The emperor would boast about the thousands or tens of thousands his soldiers raped, killed, or crucified.

By contrast, there isn't a political leader today who will crow on the global stage that he has tortured and abused thousands or millions. It's not that it doesn't happen, but when it does, he'll deny it. When and how did this change of global values occur? Tom Holland, who isn't even a Christian, says it all changed at the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul is the one who insisted that the crucifixion of Jesus was not weakness but strength, not horror but beauty, not shame but glory.

As a Roman and a Jew, Paul had passionately and violently rejected the idea that a God or Lord or Messiah could be crucified, that death on a cross could be God's primary strategy to transform the world. Paul knows that God having his only Son die a torturous, shameful death was a scandal to Jews and laughably absurd to Romans.

Notice what he says here in Philippians 2. In one of the clearest New Testament declarations, he insists that Jesus was and is fully God and became fully human, looking for all the world like a slave, suffering even death on a cross. Why? Because this turns sinful human thinking on its head. The American impulse is separation; the gospel impulse is incarnation. The human impulse is power; the gospel impulse is sacrifice.

You change the world by being in it, by yielding rights, by dying to self. That's what we mean when we sing, "Ever, only, always Jesus." Only his death changes everything.

***Glory (Philippians 2:9-11; Habakkuk 2:12-14)***

If it surprised you to hear me say that the reason for Jesus is not you, here's an even larger surprise. The reason for Jesus is not Jesus. Those of us in Jesus-centered churches (that's us, that's me as a pastor) sometimes forget to say this. If everyone in the world believed in Jesus as Savior and Lord, which is usually our implied if not stated objective, God wouldn't say, "mission accomplished."

Jesus is the means, not the end. When he says, "I am the way," he means that he is the means to an end. You don't celebrate just being on the road. Where is "the way" leading? We stop reading Philippians 2:1-11 before we get to the best part. The reason for Jesus is "the glory of God the Father."

As Pastor Kevin said, "glory" is about being bigger. It's about being noticed. When you're higher or brighter or more noticed, that is "glory." The "glory of God" is God being lifted up, so that God is seen for who he is – for his power and love and faithfulness and sovereignty. The goal of all creation, the goal of all of God's work in the world, the end of the Law of Moses and the cross of Jesus is the glory of God.

What does glory look like? This is where I find Jesus in the Old Testament. I could have chosen any passage, but here's one from Habakkuk 2 –

*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.*

In Habakkuk's day there was almost nothing good to celebrate, nothing that looked like God's glory. Habakkuk lives in a moment of history when there's no evidence of God's glory, not even among God's people. His book opens with Habakkuk complaining to God that he's not doing anything about injustice in Israel. God answers that he is getting ready to do something – he's sending Babylon to punish Israel. That's sort of like you praying for God to judge the wrongs in America and God says, "I'm going to do that, soon. I'm sending North Korea to chastise the United States."

Habakkuk doesn't like that answer, but God reminds him that Babylon too will get their due. Injustice never has the last word. The changes may be slow from a human perspective, but no story of injustice on a personal or global level is the last word. God will have the last word, and the world will be made right. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Habakkuk shares this conclusion when, at the end of his book, he says that even in "the day of calamity," when floods and earthquakes ravage the earth and the UAW goes on strike and the leading political choices are Trump and Biden, "I will rejoice in God my Savior." Knowing him is enough for my strength.

Any longing you have for the world to be made right – for the end to racism and poverty and homelessness, for a cure for cancer, success in the war on drugs and answers to the mental health crisis, for humans to treat the earth with greater care, for safety and security, any longing you have is included in the biblical ideal and promise: “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”

In biblical language, oppressors will get their due. Evil will be judged. Jesus Christ will return in power and glory. The groaning of creation itself will stop. The lion will lie down with the lamb. Pet birds will be cage free. (OK, that one’s not in the Bible.)

Our reason for optimism about the future is ultimately not human effort. It is the promise of the glory of God. In any moment of suffering or chaos it feels impossible. People say, “The world has never been in worse shape.” Have you read any history? “It can’t get any worse.” Have you read the book of Revelation? “There’s no way this will ever turn around.” Do you know my Jesus? Nobody ever started lower or was exalted higher. His ascension is a foretaste of the glory of God.

God is not worried about his glory. God doesn’t check his Instagram feed or turn on the TV to see if things are trending up. What I notice in Philippians 2 is that “glory” is not in my job description. It’s in God’s. God is the one responsible for “every knee” and “every tongue.” And he will be glorified.

### ***The Mind (Philippians 2:1-5)***

Then what should be my response? For that we go to the opening verses of Philippians 2, where Paul tells the Philippians it’s all about the mind. My one sermon is about the mind. Preaching is about shaping the mind with truth from the Bible.

If Paul’s message about the cross was how God chose to change the world, Paul’s mission to Philippi was the single most important turning point. Philippi was the first European city Paul evangelized. He wouldn’t have gone there except that the Holy Spirit had closed other doors and Paul had a vision, “Come over into Macedonia and help us.”

Philippi was as Roman a city as there was in the ancient world, other than Rome itself. It was a “little Rome.” It had been settled by retired Roman soldiers. Let that sink in. Most Romans wanted nothing to do with the brutality of the cross. The guys who had founded Philippi were the men who had commanded the cross, overseen it, and driven the spikes into wrists and feet. They were the perpetrators of the worst torture the world has conceived. They were either callously brutal or perhaps victims of PTSD. They brought to their new community their wives, their children, and their slaves. The first converts in the city were a female entrepreneur named Lydia, a Roman jailer, and their entire households.

Imagine now Paul writing to this group of people. He asks them to consider whether they have ever experienced encouragement, comfort, sharing, tenderness, or compassion. A typical Roman military veteran hasn't known any of that, not in the military anyway, and neither has his wife or his children or his slaves – not from him anyway. Paul says, "If you've known any of that, you didn't get it from Roman values. You got it because of Jesus."

Tom Holland is saying the same is true today. These values don't exist everywhere in our world, but where they do, it's because of the cross of Jesus. You live in a very different world than the pre-Jesus world, the pre-Paul world. If people care about you, it's because of Jesus. Human dignity and worth and even the right to demand fair wages or make a profit or make a scientific advance or join a political party, it's because of Jesus. So think about it, Paul says. Think about how much better the world is, your world is, and remember it's Jesus who changed everything.

With these benefits firmly in your mind and heart, then, "make my joy complete" by changing *how you think* about others. Find reasons to get along. Find ways to unite. Notice selfish ambition and vain conceit in your own life and deal with it. Value other people, not just other believers. How would you treat a slave or a child or a stranger if you really believed they have *more* value than you to God? Move toward connection.

Be like Bobby every day. Bobby is about friendship, about connection. How can people connect with God if they can't connect with you? Live your life in such a way that because you connect with them, you move toward them, you befriend them, they see in you a reason to connect with Jesus.

Let the mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.

### ***Beyond surface-level***

So that's it – my one sermon. It's Jesus, Glory, and the Mind. To phrase it another way, it's faith in Jesus, hope in the glory of God, and reframing the mind to love like Jesus loved. Faith, hope, and love. That's my one sermon.

You may say, "That's not very original." Thank you. Joey also asked ChatGPT to compare my three decades of sermons to prominent Christian theologians. Chat found parallels to St. Augustine (personal introspection with Scripture), Martin Luther (the authority of Christ and Scripture), John Wesley (personal holiness and a personal relationship with Jesus), C. S. Lewis (a theology accessible to today's audience), Tim Keller (combining Scriptural insight and modern culture), and Beth Moore (biblical analysis and actionable insights).

My first thought was, "My preaching is in good company." Then I realized that's not what ChatGPT was saying at all. Chat was saying, "You stole all your best ideas!"

One of the best compliments a preacher of thirty years can hear is, “You never said anything original.” I got it from them, they got it from Paul, and he got it from Jesus.

God loved the world so much that he came into it in the person of Jesus, who became fully human and descended even to the point of dying a death reserved for slaves. He didn’t run from us; he ran toward the likes of the Apostle Paul, toward the likes of you and me. All this is for the glory of God, so go love somebody like that and the world will see his glory. God is all about connections, now and in eternity.

So what was that ChatGPT one paragraph-summary of all of my preaching? Here it is: ***“The overarching theme is the call for believers to deepen their understanding and relationship with Jesus and God, moving beyond surface-level faith and seeking a profound and intimate connection.”*** Amen.

Just one last thing. September 17 is Wife Appreciation Day. The church is the bride of Christ. I can’t find enough or the right words to say thank you to you, Jesus’ wife. You have loved me and my family well. You have been patient, forgiving, encouraging, generous, and appreciative. Happy Wife Appreciation Day to all of you.