

I'm excited today. This is going to be a fun one. .

I'm excited because this last week we had a council meeting and the leadership here decided to implement a new discipleship plan at St. Paul's. It's a plan that I've been working on for a while. It's a plan meant to strengthen our church, a plan for the good of our congregation.

The plan goes something like this:

The first Sunday of every month each of you will get a slip of paper on the way out of worship. The slip will have two things on it: one, a book of the Bible and the other, a book on Christian doctrine. So, you'll get a slip of paper with your name on the top with "Genesis" and "A Simple Way to Pray" by Martin Luther.

That slip of paper is your assigned reading for the month. You will have the rest of that month to read and study those two books.

Then on the last Sunday of the month I'm going to give you a test on what you were supposed to read and study. There will be some memory work from the Bible book you were supposed to read, a lot of multiple choice and true and false, a couple longer essays – all told, the test shouldn't take more than an hour and a half.

But don't worry, if you read what I assign you and do a little bit of study, the test won't be too hard!

Oh, and for this discipleship plan to work, we are going to have to make church attendance mandatory, because you've got to be here to know what your assignment is and to take the test.

Sound exciting? Sounds like a pretty awesome discipleship plan the council approved this last week, am I right?

The rational is pretty simple: It sickens me to think that maybe, there are some hypocrites in this church – some people just going through some of the outward motions of Christianity without actually having saving faith. It sickens me to think that some of you here may have the precious gift of God's word at your fingertips (available to you in more ways than ever before in the history of the world), but you aren't using it, you aren't reading it, studying it, memorizing it, and growing your faith through it.

I and the leadership here don't like being sickened by the presence of hypocrisy, so we are implementing this new discipleship plan to do a little weeding out.

These tests will be a pass/fail kind of thing. I'll correct them and if you don't get better than 80%, we really don't want you taking communion with us until you improve your grades. And if you don't pass for three or four months in

a row, well, then your membership at St. Paul's will be in jeopardy, because obviously you don't care... you might just be a hypocrite.

I know this new discipleship plan may come as a shock to some of you, but we have solid Biblical grounding.

You heard it just a minute ago: Paul told us in the reading from 2 Corinthians to test ourselves, so one of the new things we are going to be doing as a congregation is actually testing you – making sure your faith is genuine.

So, what do you think? What do you think about this new discipleship plan at St. Paul's? Are you as excited and pumped up about it as I am?...

I hope you all understand by now that I'm speaking entirely tongue-in-cheek. This is *not* what we are going to be doing as a congregation. This is *not* what Paul had in mind in 2 Corinthians. I assume the council would have asked for my resignation had I actually presented a plan like this last week. I won't be handing out any tests any time soon...

That discipleship plan doesn't sound all that fun, does it? Most of you finished school a while ago (some of you much longer ago than others ;)), and I'm guessing that one of the things you were glad to be done with was the constant testing.

A congregation that functioned this way would be, at best, an intimidating group to be a part of. It would make church feel like work, and how many of you need more things added to your schedules?

That new discipleship plan sounds awful and wrong, and as I explained the discipleship plan it is not something that Paul (the author of 2 Corinthians) or God would have us do. But Paul still did say, "**Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.**"

So, maybe we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

You see, from the Bible's perspective, Paul's perspective, God's perspective, the problem with this little scenario I laid out isn't the test. The problem is with the church giving the test and making membership contingent on the outcome of the test. God makes clear in his Bible that the purpose of the church is *not* to root out hypocrites – that's God's job (read Jesus' parable about the Weeds among the Wheat in Matthew 13 for just one place that teaches this truth).

The problem is not with the test. The problem is with the church, or your pastor being the one who administers the test.

God is clear in his word. In this world we will be tested - tested not by the church, but by God himself.

The pages of the Bible are full of people tested by God. Maybe as an example, you remember one of the most famous testing's God handed out:

Abraham. The guy who waited 100 years to have a son, Isaac, and what does God tell Abraham to do with Isaac? Go up on a mountain and sacrifice your son to me. If you really love me, you need to prove it to me by killing your only son. It was a test, a pretty gut-wrenching test at that.

And isn't the story Jesus told in Matthew today all about God testing. God says to all of us in one way or another, "Go and work for me today," and then he watches to see if we actually go and work.

He says to us, go – live your life according to my instructions in my word.

Live your life with correct priorities and time management. There are a lot of things begging for your attention. All of them seem real and pressing and urgent. In the face of that tyranny of the urgent will you let my word guide your life as you prioritize? Will you put me, time with me in prayer, time studying my word, time sharing my word with your loved ones and strangers on the street, will you put me above all the noise of this world clamoring for your attention.

He says, "Go." And then he watches to see if you do it.

He says, "Go" – Worship the Lord your God and serve him only. Love your God more than money, success, popularity, safety, comfort, things. Love your God more than your own family. Love your God more than anything else and make sure that your budgeting of money, time, and energy clearly communicate that you love the Lord your God and service him only.

He says, "Go." And then he steps back and watches to see if you do.

And friends, that's just the first commandment. There are nine more of them that make up a pretty good summary of the test that our God lays out for us.

And friends the stakes of God's tests are much higher than membership at St. Paul's. You know the stakes. Ezekiel couldn't have been any clearer on the stakes for these tests God gives us. "**The soul who sins is the one who will die.**"

You think me giving you a test would be an uncomfortable, un-fun, and intimidating thing? Every day the God of heaven and earth lays tests at your feet. Every day he gives you opportunities to make the choice between serving yourself and serving him. Every day he says to you: **Son, go and work today in the vineyard.** And then he watches to see what you do. And for God, 80% or 90% is not good enough. You need 100% to pass these tests.

**And the soul who sins is the one who will die...**

Maybe it has been a while since you have been tested in a classroom, but do you remember the feeling of being woefully unprepared for a test? Maybe it was a pop quiz and you didn't do your homework the night before.

Back in college, one of my Latin professors always wore a red tie on testing days because red was the color Romans wore into battle – yeah, real cute... He also was known to give pop quizzes on the homework from the night before. You'd see him walk into the classroom and you could almost hear and audible sigh of relief if the tie wasn't red. And if it was red... maybe you remember how that feels.

Listening to God talk about testing: Does that make you squirm in your seats at all? Do you feel like that kid, totally unprepared for the test the teacher is handing out?

You should. That's what God's law does to us – the "do this and don't do that or else" tests that he places before us each day. It makes us aware of just how unprepared we are to stand before our God and take his tests.

But you know how these sermons work by know, don't you? Pastor is going to use God's law, God's test to make us feel horrible about ourselves, to make us realize how much we've failed our God, **but**, there is always a **but!**

And that's the beauty of Christianity and the Bible, isn't it?

If all God's word had to say was, "**Test yourselves**", and if passing these tests perfectly was the only way to avoid the death God promised through Ezekiel and so many others in his Bible, well, the Christian faith would be an endlessly depressing faith.

**But** that's not how God wants it to be.

On that Ezekiel is also crystal clear. **I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD.**

And so our God shows us a different way to pass his tests and become righteous. **Now a righteousness from God, apart from the law** (apart from what you have to do, apart from the tests), **has been made known**, God tells us.

That other option: Jesus.

**Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?** Paul says.

It turns out I've been a bit misleading with you today – on a couple of counts. Not only are we *not* going to have testing here at St. Paul's, but I haven't nailed down just what testing Paul is talking about here in 2 Corinthians.

The test that Paul is talking about is *not* the test of comparing ourselves with God's law to see how we measure up (that is certainly something God's word encourages us to do, and can be a byproduct of the test Paul is talking about here, but that is *not* the test he has in mind).

No, we know that because Paul is convinced and is praying that the Corinthians will pass this test, and that they would realize that he has passed the test.

This can't be the test of earning God's love by being righteous because *no one* passes that test. Not a single person, except for Jesus, passes that test.

No, the test Paul is talking about here is the test of faith.

It's really a quite simple and sort test, I can give it to you in one question: Jesus Christ lived the perfect life that you couldn't, suffered and died on the cross to pay for all the times you failed the test of God's Ten Commandments, and rose again to promise you that you will live with him forever in heaven. Do you believe this?

It's a pass or fail test. But passing this test has nothing to do with your abilities, your commitment, your power, your successes, your prayer life, your devotional life, it has nothing to do with you at all. Passing this test has everything to do with Jesus' abilities, his commitment, his power, his successes, his life, death, and resurrection.

And when we believe this: when we utter that simple word, "Yes, I believe it," that answer is proof that Jesus lives in our hearts by the power of his word, his baptism, his communion. And friends, when Jesus lives in your heart, it changes you from the outside in.

First of all it makes us acceptable in God's sight, free from the consequences of sin, as if we had passed the test of the Ten Commandments, even though we don't.

Second, it makes us change our minds... like that first son in Jesus' parable for today. Knowing that even though we have wronged our God and failed his test, he still loves and forgives us in Jesus, makes us want to go and work in his vineyard – to live the way he has asked us too, not so that we can make him love us, but because he already does and we want to thank him by trying our hardest and working in his vineyard.

So, I am excited today but not because of a new discipleship plan here at St. Paul's. I'm excited because even though I've failed God's test of obedience, I have not failed the test of faith. Jesus lives in this heart. He made his home in here the day I was baptized, and by his word and his power, I pass the test. So do you.

Amen.