

“Intergalactic Peace, the Middle Way, and Livin’ Like Jesus”

2 Corinthians 8:7–15

Michael B. Hood

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

June 30, 2024

You know, I feel pretty good about my knowledge of the Bible. I feel familiar with most of it. Yet this week I opened up the bulletin to get acquainted with this week’s scripture and read something I felt totally unfamiliar with.

It was this selection from 2 Corinthians. I read it and was struck by Paul’s challenge to the Corinthians to live a life of charity in all that they do but placing that challenge in context of finding balance in their lives and seeking balance in the world. This exhortation of finding balance in our lives guided my thoughts back to one of the most influential pieces of work in my life, one that I often return to.

Star Wars. When I was a child, I was obsessed with Star Wars. I thought it actually happened. I got into an argument with a kid in kindergarten about it. I was convinced that Star Wars was real, and they were trying to tell me that it wasn’t. I thought, dude, it happened a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. They tell you that right at the beginning. How dense can you be? I believed it. I imagine 5-year-old me sitting on top of the jungle gym afterwards thinking; “Well, maybe it is all made up, maybe it didn’t actually happen.” It was an existential crisis for 5-year-old Michael.

Which is strange, because I was also obsessed with Jurassic Park but had no problem saying, “Oh yeah. This could never happen.”

I still like Star Wars. As cheesy as it can be, there is something captivating about it. The struggle for intergalactic peace, the inner battle of identity, purpose, and meaning. When I was a kid, the storyline was so clear, right? It was good versus evil. If someone popped out a red lightsaber; oh—bad guy, obviously. Let’s go get’em.

As I aged, became more seasoned, I believe now that I was totally wrong. It is a story about balance. If you watch the original six films, problems occur when balance is disrupted. In the original three films there is an “evil empire” that rules with an iron fist, embracing power and unbridled desire in order to maintain control. Then they get blown up. In the prequel films, the dissociation of “good guys” causes them to fall into hubris, where grace and compassion for those who are suffering is lost. An equally problematic imbalance that ultimately leads to them also getting blown up.

Put simply, the story is not about good vs. evil, but about finding balance in our world and in our lives. The struggle for peace is not about wholly eliminating one side or another but finding balance.

I think it is easy to view our lives through a similar lens; there are good days, good moments, and then there are bad days, bad moments. We do what we can to chase after the good things and work really hard to avoid the bad things. That’s ok, but it is a simplistic view of life that doesn’t work in reality. It can so easily lead us into a realm of bouncing between highs and lows, between extremes.

I think of the hardcore diet culture that tells us that if something is “unhealthy” in any way, then it is bad and shouldn’t go into our body. So, we feel guilt and shame for enjoying something pleasurable. Or even worse if we have a body that doesn’t meet the standard of Instagram-able near-perfection, doesn’t look a certain way or doesn’t perform a certain way, then it’s wholly bad, and thus we — our selves — are bad. That’s not a life of balance. It is self-deprecation that leads to a toxic mindset. That’s a poor way of life to have for yourself, and to push onto someone else.

It is easy for this good/bad view to infiltrate our faith too. If we believe that, “Well, good Christians always go to church. I’ve missed so much that I don’t really want to go. I’m just not a good Christian” then we can easily follow that route and stop participating in the life of faith fully. It might even feel good. So, we overindulge ourselves on a life free of discipline because we don’t see ourselves meeting the “good and faithful servant” status at all and give up.

That's no way to live either. We eventually seek a sense of meaning that only a little discipline of the spiritual life can give you.

We must find balance in our lives, embracing the difficult things in life without hiding, while also searching for the joy-filled moments. We must challenge ourselves to be better without living a life devoid of pleasure.

Paul's teaching in this selection of Corinthians is one of finding balance and harmony in one's life. He is advising them to be charitable to others. He tells them that this advice is given "in order that there may be a fair balance." As it is written, the "one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

He challenges them to finish the things they set their desires towards. Why? So that your eagerness may find a match in the completeness of the goal. It touches me; I have big ideas, but often lack the motivation to see them actually come to life, and that is crushing. We need a life of balance.

Paul's teaching of trying to find balance in our lives reminds me of a Buddhist teaching called the *Middle Way*. In the teaching of the Middle Way, the goal is to find balance between indulgence and deprivation in order to find spiritual equilibrium and harmony. That is the key to finding peace within oneself. I think Paul is teaching something very similar.

If we throw caution and discipline to the wind and overindulge ourselves, and hold on to too much, it is easy to lose a sense of meaning.

On the other hand, when we over deprive our lives or rule ourselves in a legalistic way; we strip our spirits from experiencing pleasure, rest, and surprise, and we become numb and hardened. Neither is a good, full life if we can avoid it.

It seeps into the small things in life too. When I open my dresser drawers at home, it is stuffed full of t-shirts. None of them fit me anymore. Now that I have rounded 30, my body has changed and a medium is now a crop top.

Here is the dilemma: every time I try one on, I feel uncomfortable. I feel sad that I don't take care of my body like I want to, and I feel mad at myself for having so much that I can do nothing with. Also, I have no room in my dresser and I can never find the few things that still fit!

But I earned those shirts, they represent moments in my life, I have worn them for years. I'm not ready to get rid of them. I have an emotional attachment to them. I am over-indulged in my plenty, even though they no longer serve me.

Okay, but here's the kicker: I don't want to buy new clothes. They're expensive! I have rent to pay, mouths to feed, I don't want to spend my money on clothing (and I don't like cheap clothes). I also want to try and live up to my commitment to live a simple life of not having too much. I am stuck between two extremes.

And being stuck between is not always the same as finding the middle. My fashion life, though be it humble, is in turmoil because I am thrashing between my emotional attachment of two extremes, not finding balance between the two.

The Middle Way, and Paul's teaching would tell me to slow down. It's time to let go of both, to find the solution that honors the attachment but is able to let it go; one that helps keep the commitment made and allows freedom within the harmony. To find a plan forward and to finish doing it so that my eagerness (on all accounts) may be matched by completing it according to my means.

The Middle Way is not just for us though. When we have an abundance of peace, balance and harmony in our lives, it spreads. You cannot teach what you do not know, and you cannot give what you do not have. If you desire to spread balance into the world, find balance within yourself. Find the middle way for yourself and it will precipitate into the world around you.

Or as Paul would say in many places; live like Christ. Live like Jesus.

Our world is imbalanced. There are far too many who have too much, and far too many who have too little, physically, emotionally, socially. Christ entered a world of imbalance to show us a way of restoration: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich”

Live like Jesus, who had everything, yet gave so much. Who often retreated to fast and pray yet knew a good glass of wine and a hearty meal just as good as the well-to-do tax collector. The Jesus who spent equal time speaking to the crowds as he did teaching his disciples behind closed doors. The Christ that flipped tables and embraced the brokenhearted. The Jesus who challenged the scribes and the Pharisees, yet listened to the woman at the well, and sat at the feet of his teachers as child.

Jesus lived a life of harmony, peace, and balance and it poured out from him so much so that it allowed him to become the one who turned the scales of his world.

In our gospel lesson today we are introduced to two women. One girl who is unclean, cast out and not worthy of even the disciples’ attention. Another who is the beloved daughter of a synagogue leader. Jesus offers them both the healing they need, the peace they seek. Yet Jesus notices something peculiar, something imbalanced, and through a simple use of words tips the scales.

He looks at the woman who is bleeding and calls this social castaway who wasn’t worthy of the crowds’ attention “daughter.” When he sifts through the grieving crowd to the other well-known beloved, respected, he calls her “little girl.”

Christ lived a life of balance and harmony; and his actions reflected that. Live like Jesus. Find the balance within yourself, and bring this world the peace it so desperately needs. Amen.