

# WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Finding Courage and Compassion When Cruelty Is Trending

BY JOHN PAVLOVITZ

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## SERMON SERIES GUIDE

Preaching *Worth Fighting For* as a sermon series can offer your congregation encouragement and guidance for challenging seasons when hope feels dim and we are tempted to give up the fight for goodness and values in the face of ignorance, cruelty, and despair. Make clear to your congregation that you are not advocating a particular party or candidate, but seeking to empower and sustain people in the long fight for the common good. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “let us not grow weary in doing what is right” (Gal. 6:9).

This six-week sermon series guide suggests scriptures from Acts and the epistles to emphasize how the body of Christian believers has struggled since its inception to discern and advocate for the most faithful way to follow Jesus. These texts can be challenging and controversial; many modern Christians actively dislike and disagree with Paul, which could be seen as a benefit to this series as the goal is not to relitigate ancient debates but to find kinship with and inspiration from our predecessors’ experience. The issues differ, but our commitment to the way of Jesus—and the challenges that we face in that pursuit—is perennial.

In this guide, you will find a one-sentence summary of each sermon’s intended message, a suggested Scripture passage on which to focus, and a few paragraphs to prompt your thinking and research as you begin to craft the week’s sermon. These prompts are but starting points for addressing the complex feelings your people may be experiencing. Each week of this guide corresponds to the essays in each part of the book. Read the essays within each week’s focus and see what resonates most with you and your congregation as you discern how best to care for and motivate your compassionate community in the long, hard fight for good.



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# WEEK 1: WARNING LIGHTS

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**KEY MESSAGE:** Fighting for good is a long, hard battle—pace yourself.

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## Focus Scripture: 2 Corinthians 13:5-10

Like Pavlovitz, consider opening with an example from your own experience with a car's warning light system or some other alarm you've been tempted to ignore. As he says on page 2, "We ignore the warnings and alarms within us all the time. Physical fatigue comes, and instead of slowing down, cutting back, or—God forbid—taking a nap, we down another cup of coffee or energy drink hoping to buy just enough of an artificial turbo boost to thrust us back into the day for a few more hours." We might even humble-brag about how ragged we are running ourselves.

The Apostle Paul was a master of the humble-brag, boasting about everything he endured for the sake of the gospel—persecution, insults, shipwrecks, even the torment of Satan himself, he said. He was a man on a mission, with an intense personality and a message he was determined to spread, no matter what the personal cost. Paul celebrates his hardships for a good reason, though. The grace and power of Christ are "made perfect in weakness," Paul says. "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (vv. 9-10).

For those of us feeling burdened by the weight of all that is broken in the world—wars, injustice, violence, and pain—we may be unsure whether our deep empathy is a strength or a weakness. It empowers us to speak out and take action, but it takes a toll on us that must be acknowledged. We must be mindful of and sensitive to two different kinds of wounds: the wounds of the world and the wounds we sustain attending to them. The former are usually much better at getting our attention than the latter are.

Being human is hard, and being a compassionate human even more so. If we are to sustain the compassion it takes to make a difference in this world, we're going to have to pace ourselves. Pay attention to the warning signs and take care of yourself. "Dead people make really lousy activists," Pavlovitz says (p. 3). If being human is a weakness, we can take comfort that our fatigue and despair is a result of how much we care—and know that God will work in our weakness to give us strength for the fight.



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# WEEK 2: HOW WE GET BETTER

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**KEY MESSAGE:** Find what sustains you and cling to it.

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## Focus Scripture: Galatians 6:2-9

While week 1 of this series is about simply recognizing that we can't go full throttle in the fight for good without burning out, this week offers more direct guidance for how to sustain ourselves for the long haul. Paul offers good advice on this subject at the end of his letter to the Galatians. He's spent most of the letter arguing theological points, agitated as he is that some in Galatia have been listening to other teachers with whom Paul disagrees. The details of these theological differences are not pertinent to this particular sermon any more than the details of what tragedies and injustices are leading your congregants into compassion fatigue. Our focus, like Paul's as he closes his scathing letter, is on moving forward in ways that nurture the community as a whole and keep our eyes on what matters most.

"Bear one another's burdens," says verse 2, understanding that some may stumble and others thrive at different times. We all struggle with different things, and we all have days where we feel like it's all just too much, but as Pavlovitz points out on pages 30-31, being in community with those who "share a worldview of acceptance, similar hopes and fears, a common vision for the world. . . [It] makes you feel like you can exhale." It lets you know that "you're not alone and you're not crazy."

Paul urged the Galatians to "not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up" (v. 9). We know this is easier said than done, but we can cultivate strategies for sustaining ourselves. Rest, as discussed last week. Seek out the people who you can trust to help bear your burdens. Be on the lookout for signs of hope (and know that you are one of them!). Choose faith over fear. Working for the good of all is a lifelong pursuit—cling to those things that keep you going.



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# WEEK 3: FRACTURES AND FAULT LINES

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**KEY MESSAGE:** Loving all people can cause tension with certain people.

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## Focus Scripture: Acts 15:30–41

Imagining the early church, it's tempting to picture all the believers together on Pentecost, tongues of fire on every head as they understood clearly what so many disparate people were saying. If we celebrate that scene as exemplifying the early Christian community, reading the rest of the book of Acts should disabuse us of that notion. Divisions would soon abound over whether and how Gentiles could join the sect originated by Jews, who would lead and preach, how they would do so, and more.

We're all aware of the divided times we live in, even and especially among those who claim the name of Christ. Just as in the church's first decades, commitment to Jesus does not prevent serious differences and the effect they can have on our relationships. Chances are, there are many in your church who have experienced a relational fracture in recent years over faith, politics, and the intersections of the two—and the grief is immeasurable. Sometimes, it's a relational cold war, in which we simply don't speak (at all, or at least not about anything important) to those with whom we used to be close. Sometimes, certain relationships cause too much harm to be sustained, and we need to love those people from a distance. At the end of today's Scripture reading, we see Paul and Barnabas parting ways after a disagreement that (to our modern sensibilities, at least) seems less fraught than many we deal with today.

Living our deepest values with integrity means that we are going to be in a constant push and pull with the people around us and the kinship we feel with them. At some point, compassionate people find themselves in the tension between their convictions and their relationships: struggling to figure out how to offer empathy to everyone. We can practice empathy for those with whom we disagree by humbly remembering that everyone is a product of their stories and experiences and that we are all on a journey of learning and growing.



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# WEEK 4: PRODIGALS AND REFUGEES

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**KEY MESSAGE:** Faith and church are not the same.

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## Focus Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

We have an ideal vision of what church should be. Paul exhorted the Ephesians to embody that vision in his letter, saying, “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (vv. 1-3).

Presumably, your congregation strives to be a loving community, humble in its attitudes, gentle and patient with one another. This sermon is an opportunity to articulate what your church stands for, while humbly confessing that sometimes the church (even yours) misses the mark, and some do real damage to people. The notion of unity has often been weaponized by churches to keep people from challenging the status quo, to dismiss people who speak out for justice as being “divisive.” Chances are, some people in your congregation are there because they’ve been dismissed in that way in their former churches. Sometimes our faith journeys take us away from the faith community we’ve always known, and this is not something people should be shamed for.

Paul warns not to be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine,” seeming to assume some anti-Christian intentionality (“people’s trickery” and “deceitful scheming”), but our experience shows that sometimes even with good intentions, the church is the one tossing people “to and fro” (v. 15). By contrast, it is sometimes those who are most committed to the ways of Christ who “speak the truth in love” to the church when the church gets it wrong.

It’s easy for those in progressive churches to insist that the hateful voices in this country don’t represent “real Christianity,” but sadly, what most people experience from organized religion—misogyny, bigotry, exclusion—is what Christianity largely is here and now. Our job is not to defend an institution but to follow Jesus as best we can—defending the marginalized, caring for the poor, challenging unjust powers, and humbly seeking truth wherever it can be found.



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# WEEK 5: WHAT'S AT STAKE

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**KEY MESSAGE:** Beliefs require action—and our action is necessary.

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## Focus Scripture: James 2:1-17

Making sure to reiterate your commitment to not endorsing a party or candidate, this sermon is the time to speak more specifically to the issues currently troubling your compassionate community, and how living out our values can make a real difference in the direction our country takes.

Pavlovitz's chapters in this section address racism, Christian nationalism, homophobia and transphobia, religious bigotry, abortion, and misogyny. Speaking on these topics can often spark accusations of being “too political.” You will have to carefully consider the approach to take with your congregation, and may find that focusing on the meaning of politics as how people are treated—and therefore pertinent to our faith—is a necessary first step. The Apostle James makes this point clear, that faith (presumably defined here as intellectual beliefs and/or heartfelt devotion) disconnected from our actions is no faith at all.

James specifically points to the hypocrisy of “showing partiality” (vv. 1-9). The example he uses is defending the interests of the rich and denying dignity to the poor. Nearly every issue of injustice that we battle today can be defined in these terms: perpetuating the dominant status not just of wealthy people, but white people, Christians, men, cisgender and heterosexual people, etc., while denying equal treatment to racial, religious, gender, and sexual minorities.

This has been a bad stretch for diverse humanity, for vulnerable people, for racial equity, for people buried in debt. And it's been a bad time for those of us who grieve the erasing of so much progress in such a short time, even if we saw it coming. It's tempting, (especially if we are among the privileged and not facing as much personal risk) to simply give up, find another place to call home—a bluer state or a kinder nation—or at least to turn off the news and be oblivious to the losses and the overreach and the regression.

But if we do choose to separate our faith from its application in the world, the same people who are celebrating the rollbacks and the regressions right now will have an even easier time bending the arc of the moral universe away from justice. Our convictions require us to stay active—advocating, serving, voting, protecting—because it's not “just politics,” it's people. And people are worth the fight.



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# WEEK 6: THE FUTURE WE WANT

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**KEY MESSAGE:** Love wins, but it may require overtime.

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## Focus Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:50–58

The earliest Christians thought Jesus would be coming back pretty soon, and that they would be raised up—resurrected—like Jesus was. So there was a lot of concern about what exactly that meant. (What about those who had already died and their bodies decomposed? Will those of us still living die right then and then be raised?) In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul is trying to explain what will happen (as best he knows, because really—who knows?) but summarizes by alluding to prophets Isaiah and Hosea, saying “death has been swallowed up in victory. . . . Where, O death, is your sting?” (vv. 54-55).

This is the promise of Jesus’ resurrection: that death, the powers of this earth, do not win in the end. Love wins. Life wins. We can cling to this when despair threatens to take over and it feels like forces of injustice and exclusion will win the day. In the end, good wins.

So what do we do in the meantime? “In the end” doesn’t feed or heal or rescue the people who are suffering now. People in Corinth and the other early churches wondered about that too, and some people took it as an excuse to do nothing. That’s why Paul says “be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (v. 58). We keep working to help love win in the short term as well as the long term.

That’s been the goal of this series, to help us keep fighting for the future we want, despite the resistance we encounter. Too often, we feel resistance to love and mistake it for our failure. But this pushback to goodness should neither surprise nor dissuade us, nor should it be mistaken for defeat. Love has never won because it’s gone unopposed. It’s won because it is an act of defiant persistence that believes that people are worth fighting for, bleeding for, waiting for, sacrificing for. Love is not proven only in passion, but in time as well—in the perseverance of its work within, around, and through us.



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