

Sermon – March 27, 2022
“The Courage of Jesus”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we work in your harvest on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! Welcome to spring, but don't put away your winter coats just yet. It looks like we might be in for another blast of cooler air for a few days. Spring will get here and the clouds of pollen will arrive, but it may take a few more days.

Have any of us ever day dreamed about “if onlys?” You know, this is when we think about how our lives might have been “if only” we had more friends, more money, a faster car, a bigger boat, a larger house, more time for what we want to do, fewer reasons to work, or less stress in our lives. On Kay's and my drive from King George to the parsonage, the Virginia lottery department has put up a Lotto sign. It has great big letters that display the current lottery balance. The numbers go up and down, sometimes getting as high as \$500 million. And when it gets high, I often think about the “if onlys” I have thought of over the years and how winning the lottery would suddenly make them possible. Now, I am not going to win the lottery for several reasons, one of which is that I don't purchase lottery tickets. I understand the statistical odds and know the chance of purchasing a winning lottery ticket is practically zero, or so close to it that it makes no sense to waste a dollar to buy a ticket. But still, I will sometimes think of all of the generous things I could do if I received 500 million unexpected dollars and how my life would be renewed and changed. Anyone else ever think about what they would do or how their lives would change if they won the lottery?

If we look at Romans 12:2, we can begin to get some biblical input on how to renew and change our lives. Romans 12:2 tells us our lives change when our minds are changed and renewed: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.” There is a way to find transformation, true transformation, through God's renewing of our minds.

The danger with lottery winnings is that our minds are not transformed but our circumstances are changed. If our circumstances are changed without needed transformation in our

thinking, we will most likely end up in the same circumstances again. We see this play out in many circumstances in life. Among lottery winners, 44% percent are broke within five years. A third of them will have declared bankruptcy. Being bankrupt doesn't enter into our day dreams about winning the lottery, does it? What occurs is these winners have had their circumstances changed, but they have the same mindset about money. They end up where they started because their minds were not transformed. The same is too true for those being released from prison. The recidivism rate for those leaving prison is almost 68%. Those who have participated in Prison Fellowship's discipleship program, a biblically based program, by contrast have a recidivism rate of less than 1%. The typical prisoners spend time in prison, but their minds are not transformed and they return to a life of crime and end back in prison. The idea we need to adopt is that transformation comes from changing our minds, not from changing our circumstances. I will not be generous and support worthy organizations and noble ministries with my new lottery winnings if I have not already become generous with what God has placed in my hand.

During Lent, we are seeking to grow in our understanding of what it means to live a Jesus-shaped life. One of the attributes we need is a Jesus-shaped mind. We need to be those who follow Jesus with the mind of Christ. Our thoughts need to become the thoughts of Christ. We don't need our circumstances changed; we need our minds transformed so that our thoughts are changed. Many of us already know how challenging it can be to control our thoughts. We get a lot of thoughts in our heads in the course of a day. Some of those thoughts may be pleasing to us but are inconsistent with Jesus' thoughts. Some of our thoughts we may not like at all. Any of us who have struggled to change our thoughts, to transform our thinking, already know how difficult this is. We already have established, deeply rooted patterns of thought or habits. Habits can be very difficult to break. They can be helpful if our habits of thought are from God or are consistent with life in God's kingdom. However, when our thought habits are not from God, they become what the Bible calls, "strongholds." Turn to 2 Corinthians 10 and let's look together at verses 3 – 4. Here we will find "Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds." What is a stronghold? It is simply a lie that we believe. A stronghold is any mindset, value, teaching or philosophy that opposes the truth of God. A military stronghold is a well defended place, something we would call a fort. On the south end of the Eastern Shore, there is a fort built to defend the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay during WWII. It has a 16in gun barrel on display. That gun was capable of reaching any enemy ships that tried to enter the bay; it was a stronghold on the east

coast. By contrast, spiritual strongholds are lies we believe that keep us from what God wants. Let's take a look together at some statements and see if we can identify some spiritual strongholds. Try this statement: "God really doesn't love me like he loves other people." What do we think? Is that true? No, that's a lie. God loves us each with infinite love, enough to send His son to die on a cross for our sins. Let's try another one: "If I do what God wants, I'll be miserable." This is also a lie. When we are in God's will, we are living as our true selves. We will never be more alive than when we are in a right relationship with God and living as God wills. Okay, one more: "God doesn't hear me when I pray." This statement is also a lie. The God who creates the stars in the heavens also wants to hear our prayers and is waiting for us to pray, to talk with Him, and to share our joys, sorrows, needs, and concerns.

Strongholds are not just lies we believe about God, but are lies that we tell ourselves. Anyone ever told themselves that we can never forgive ourselves for some hurtful thing we have done? In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven, and we also can find forgiveness for our own selves in Jesus Christ. Anyone ever tell themselves, "I will never amount to anything." As a believer in Jesus Christ, we are adopted into the relationship Jesus has with the Father. We become princesses and princes in the kingdom of God. As Peter writes in his first letter, chapter 2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Don't miss who we are in Christ: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, called out of darkness into marvelous light. That is who we are as believers in Jesus Christ. Is there anything more wonderful?

Many of us, if we will admit, struggle with strongholds as we seek to grow into the image of Christ. Behind these persistent sins is a lie that we are believing. We often allow the untrue thoughts that come from these lies to tell us what we are to do. We should recall the words of Jesus, this time from John 8:32, "and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." This freedom is seen in us becoming mentally healthy and spiritually free. To accomplish this, we need to demolish strongholds. Strongholds are demolished by exchanging the lie we have incorporated into our thoughts with the truth. Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ." We are to stop our thoughts from running wild and instead make them obedient to Jesus. We try to change our thoughts on our own, but we fail and fall back into the same thought patterns and sin. Yet Jesus loves us even when we fail. Hear this good news if we are trapped in a

stronghold of sin: God loves us! God loves us not only when we are successfully resisting sin, but even when we fail miserably. God loves us when we are at our lowest moment. God's love for us does not depend on our moral performance. In Romans 5:8 Paul writes, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." Let that statement from Paul sink into our thoughts. Jesus died on the cross so that we might have forgiveness of our sins. God loves us even while we are sinners and shows it by having Jesus die for us. The good news does not end there. If we have the desire to be free from sin, God will help us to be free. We can, with God's help, take those thoughts that lead us to sin captive and change them to thoughts that lead us to obey Jesus.

How do we move into this new "thoughts-captured-for-Jesus" mode of living? One of the first steps is to have the courage to stop following secular culture and start following God's truth. Let's look at some simple things many hold as true as examples this morning. Everyone knows that George Washington had wooden teeth, right? Wrong. He actually had dentures made out of gold, ivory, lead, animal teeth, and teeth from his own slaves. Everyone knows sunflowers track the sun across the sky; this is called heliotropism. However, as the sunflower reaches maturity, it stops tracking the sun and always faces east. How about this one: Everybody knows that bats can't see, right? How many times have we used the expression someone is "blind as a bat"? Bats are incredible animals who are able to shape their ears, mouths, and facial features to allow them to hear what is in front of them and discern a moth from a branch, but bats are not blind. All bat species have eyes and can see. In fact, some species of bat have excellent night vision. How about this one: Every parent knows that candy makes kids hyper and that grandparents and great grandparents are not supposed to give their grandkids and great grandkids candy. We will be relieved to know that according to a Yale study, candy doesn't have this effect. There is no such thing as a sugar rush. This idea is not true.

There are many ideas about God and life that people hold as truth, but they are not true. Let's look at thoughts about money as an example and see if we can take captive some of our thoughts about it. Many hold to the idea that money brings security, and to have security, we need to keep all of the money we can. Jesus teaches something different. Let's turn to Matthew 6:19-21 and see what Jesus teaches about money. Jesus taught, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not

break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Christ’s followers are to seek to store their treasure in heaven, a place of eternal security, true security.

Another belief held related to money is that “financial disaster could be around the corner.” This drives many to constant worry about the needs they have in this life. But Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:31-33, “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Jesus teaches us that God knows we have needs in this life and God will meet our needs. We have to learn to lift our needs to God and trust Him to provide. As we seek to trust God, we learn to capture our thoughts about living a Jesus-shaped life. Our worries and concerns about the needs we have are thoughts we need to take captive and trust God to give us our daily bread.

Another thought many people hold to is that those who are living as a fully engaged Christian in this life lead boring lives. Gone are the things of the world that draw people, so there must only be a boring existence in a Jesus-shaped life. Think about the Christians in Ukraine at this time. Many are going into the war zones and siege areas to help those trapped get out, and to take food and water to those who are in need. Do we think that is boring? Is that not counter to the culture? Can we see the courage of these loving people who go out in the midst of such danger and personal risk to share the love of Christ? Those who are receiving their aid are developing a clearer understanding of what it means to encounter a Christian who practices extravagant love, and I am confident there is nothing boring in their experiences.

So how do we respond to the lies that are in place in the culture? Our response is not to hide, but to prepare. For us to prepare, we need to know God’s truth so that we might be able to live by it always. James 5:16 says, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” You don’t need to announce your struggles to the world; just find one safe person and confess. We’re only as sick as our secrets. We can hear the truth that God loves us, but we need to experience that love in order to be healed. We need someone to look us in the eye and say, “I know what you did, and I love you anyway and Jesus loves you.” We need to feel their embrace, to be able to believe the truth that God loves us in spite of our sin. What God asks of us is not that we avoid sin, but that we experience the abundant life in Christ. A life characterized by greater richness than life in the world. A life where we experience abundant joy, peace, and love that Jesus purchased for us when he died on the cross. Once we have begun to experience this type of life, we

will not seek the destructive illusions the world offers. Once we begin to experience the fullness of life in Christ and we begin to understand that we are loved by Jesus, we will not settle for anything else. We begin to live in the knowledge that Jesus loves us and will bring us into freedom if we will not give up, if we will get up when we fall, accept grace, and move forward toward this abundant life again with all our thoughts captive to Jesus.

There are other ways available to us to begin the process of growth in our lives. We can pray daily, read the Bible daily, join a Sunday school, join a Bible study, and read devotional material. All of these are great starts for learning and growing in the truth, and having God's Word present to transform our minds. As we begin to get God's Word in our minds and its presence grows, we begin to order our minds and make our thoughts obedient to Christ and we live like him. But we need transformed minds. Will we come to a worship service, Bible study, or Sunday school and confess our sins and seek healing? Most likely not. This is where a band, a group of 3 -5 people committed to loving each other, allows us to be who we are, to be real with each other in the security of Jesus' love. Bands are places where we can take the risk to confess our sin and hear the words, "in the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven," from the lips of those who love Jesus and love us, from those who love us as Christ loves us, who will pray for us, and encourage us in the love of Jesus. A band is where we are asked, "How is it with your soul? What are our struggles and successes? How might the Spirit and Scripture be speaking in our lives?" And these are all questions we may be willing to answer in a small group of loving Christian brothers or sisters as trust grows, but on the day someone in our band takes the risk to confess a sin or share a secret and they find only the love of Christ as the response from their band members, everything changes because in that moment everyone in the band begins to experience the love of Jesus in a new and transforming way. That transformation begins to let us capture those elusive thoughts we have in our minds for Christ. Our goal is to live like Jesus, and to accomplish our goal, we need to be transformed to think like Jesus, a thought process radically different from those found in the rest of the world. We are those who seek to make our thoughts obedient by taking "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ," a transformation that begins when we experience new depths of Jesus' love.

Pray with me: Lord Jesus, open our hearts to find new ways to encounter your love through your Word and other believers. Help us to move into the study of your Word and to seek to come together in small groups or bands to share your love in life-transforming ways. Open our hearts this day to the next step of transformation you are leading us to enter. We ask these things in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen*