

INTO THE FRAY: THREATS AND HOW WE FACE THEM

Shallow Gospel

Philippians 2:1-11

October 12, 2025

I'm scrolling on my phone at the kitchen counter when Ben comes up behind me. Ben is eight years old. You know the one. Same blue striped shirt every Sunday. His church shirt—the one he will wear. Before I even realize he's there (don't judge me), a video starts playing, one of those viral clips that the algorithms feed us. It's a preacher, red-faced, pounding the pulpit, shouting about the need to defend pure faith from its godless enemies. His voice is sharp. His gestures are aggressive. It goes on for maybe ten seconds before I can close it.

Ben is quiet. Then he tugs my sleeve. "Dad, was that a preacher yelling? You don't yell, right?"

I tell him he's right. Not really my style. He waits a moment. Then: "Dad, should you yell more? That guy has like 80,000 views!" Fair enough.

At a deep level, Ben put his finger on something we cannot ignore. In many Christian communities, the gospel has given way to anger-fueled messages of conquering faith, faith defended from its godless enemies. And if you are not yelling, your faith must be weak.

What does strength look like for followers of Jesus?

You see, that preacher Ben saw isn't an outlier. There's a movement gaining ground that claims that true faith is Christian dominion, which means eviscerating your enemies and conquering every sphere of society. Following Jesus becomes a campaign to control culture rather than take up the cross.

But when we trade the cross for conquest, we don't just get shallow faith. We fashion a false Christ to bless what Jesus condemned, drafted into service of political power. We consecrate our resentments. We baptize our rage. This is idolatry.

The gospel demands more. Paul writes: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*

Real strength. Christ, who was in the very form of God, did not weaponize that identity. He emptied himself. He took the form of a servant. He humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. Self-emptying, not self-exaltation. The cross, not the crown.

Time and again, Jesus rejects every opportunity to seize political power. Crowds following him wanted to make him ruler by force. Satan, tempting him, offered him all the kingdoms of the world. The religious establishment expected a conquering messiah riding the war horse. And Jesus said no to all of it. Why? God's kingdom does not run on the logic of conquest. It runs on the logic of the cross.

You need to know why Paul's letter is so subversive. Philippi was a Roman colony. It was fiercely loyal to the emperor. And so, Paul borrows language. "Every knee should bow." "Jesus Christ is Lord." This was the very imperial language used to worship Caesar as lord and god. But Paul says, "No. The crucified one is Lord." Not the conquering emperor. The one who offered his life in humility.

The cross is not the end. Paul goes on. God vindicates the way of the cross. *Therefore God also highly exalted him. At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue should confess.*

This is the gospel's audacious claim: that the cruciform way is how God's kingdom comes—it's the power that defeats death. Not Caesar's coercive force demanding submission through threat. But the power of sacrificial love.

This same tension persists. Today, some Christian leaders with large platforms promote what they call "Christian dominion," demanding through state law the very power

Christ rejected. It's the logic of Rome cloaked in the language of faith—and it's growing in places of power and especially online.

Theologian Howard Thurman prophetically warned us, "The bitter truth is that the Church has permitted hate-inspired groups to establish squatters rights in the minds of believers because there has not been adequate teaching of the faith in terms of human dignity." And when human dignity is not taught, human beings get crushed. The vulnerable. The stranger. The ones Jesus claimed "the least of these who are my family." Conquest theology always needs enemies to vanquish and outsiders to exclude. Here's what's at stake: If we don't actively, intentionally form people in the way of Jesus, if we are silent, if we think we can avoid this choice, the watching world will assume we're all the same. Our children will see no difference between Christ and Caesar. And they will be right to walk away.

Which brings me back to Ben—and to Henry and Coen, these two precious babies we just baptized. You see, I need to answer Ben's question not just with my words, but with the kind of faith I'm passing on to him. And we all must ask: What gospel are we forming in our children? What vision of Christ is being taught here? Are we forming them in a faith where anger masquerades as conviction and following Jesus means dominating others?

I don't want these precious children—I don't want my own sons—to inherit a faith hollowed out by vengeance. I want them to know the joy of following Jesus. I want them to know that you don't need enemies to feel alive. I want them to know that you measure faithfulness not by how loudly someone claims to know Christ but by how much they look like him. I pray that when they hear calls to conquest, they cling to the cross.

Don't be misled. Paul is not naive. An emperor sits on the throne. Philippi is overrun by imperial forces. Christians there cannot conquer the empire with the weapons of war.

So Paul gives them something far more subversive: these practices that form people into the kind of people who can't be conscripted by empire, whose citizenship is in heaven even while living under Roman rule. His commands are

as simple as they are radical. *Take the forms of servants. Humble yourselves. Regard others as better than yourselves. Have the mind of Christ.*

What Paul recommends here are not small acts of kindness to make the world a nicer place. They are disciplines that will reshape your identity over time, so that you cannot participate in a conquest theology.

Having been so shaped, our work becomes clear. To speak for those who are being demeaned and dehumanized—even when it costs you something. To welcome the stranger to the safety of your table. Don't let anyone turn your neighbor into an enemy. Let your whole life declare allegiance to the crucified Christ, not the powers that promise you dominion.

These practices will fashion us into a people the shallow gospel simply cannot use. We become a kind of outpost of sacrificial love in a culture of domination, a community practicing the mind of Christ even as the world practices conquest. This cross-shaped conviction is the only strength that will sustain us.

So Ben, I've had some time to think it over, and here's my answer. No, buddy, I shouldn't yell more. But here's why. Real strength does not make people afraid. It's being brave enough to be kind, bold enough to forgive, faithful enough to listen. Real strength looks like Jesus, not empire. And son, that's what I'm trying—with all my strength—to teach you now—and what I'm trying to learn myself.

And by the way, Ben, I saw you live it this week. We were at Sleeping Bear Dunes in Michigan on fall break, and I asked if you wanted to write something in the sand, something that others could read. I noticed that some kids had written their names in the sand, and I asked you if you wanted to write anything. And true to your nature, you didn't hesitate. You ran up that hill, and you wrote with intensity and as big as you could: "BE KIND."

That's it. That's the mind of Christ reflected in the choice of an eight-year-old. That's it. That's what happens when you're being formed in the cruciform way—you don't need to shout down your enemies. You will refuse to take up the

weapons of empire. Because you will write kindness into the world as large as you can make it because this is the way of God's kingdom.

Second Church, take your baptismal promises seriously. It matters. The gentleness you practice, the welcome you extend to children and strangers, the care you show for the vulnerable and the overlooked—the kindness you show. This is Christlike resistance to the cruelty of our age. It is how we form souls for deep faith.

Because I don't need to tell you, this isn't just a question for baptized babies or eight-year-old kids. Every single one of us is making this choice each day. In how we speak, in what we post and share, in how we live in community with each other. We are choosing again and again which way to follow.

We can chase the gospel of conquest—where faith becomes tribal rage, where we worship a messiah tailor-made to bless our resentments and we burden our children with a shallow faith they will rightly abandon. If we are silent while Christian faith is turned into a weapon of political power, we will have no one to blame but ourselves.

There is another way. We can follow the crucified Christ. The one who emptied himself for us, who chose descent over dominion.

Second Church, I believe this with all my heart. This is a moment to choose, to become an outpost of cruciform living in empire's shadow, so rooted in Christ that nothing can shake our faith. The way of the cross leads to life.

Our children are watching. They will know which way we chose. Not by the battles we win, but by how we love. False gods always fall. The choice is whether or not we will fall with them. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Pray with me: Holy One, form in us the mind of Christ. Give us courage to choose the way of the cross. Amen.