

# The Christian Imperative

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*2022-01-09*

## Introduction

You can get a PDF of the sermon text including the slides at <https://willows.org.za/sermons>. Look for 9 January, 2022.

[For those reading the PDF notes, boxed text refers to slides I used during the presentation.]

[willows.org.za/sermons](https://willows.org.za/sermons)

If you have been following my devotions and sermons you will notice that today's sermon will appear to be a major departure from one of my common threads, namely that of living in community, but that is not the case. I will explain at the end, but keep that in mind as we go along.

I believe that this is going to challenge many people and to help you work through all of this I have written it all out and have already put it on the web site, so you can even download it right now! My aim is to help us change our behaviour, and if you're anything like me, that is no small task!, so before I continue, I really do need to pray:

*Dear God, please speak through me in this sermon. Help me to shine Your Light for others to see, even though I am so far from where I believe you want me to be as far as this topic is concerned.*

*Please help us all — Your people — to grasp the importance of this so that we may be efficient and effective witnesses of Your Love in this broken world.*

*Amen.*

Today's sermon is topical, both in the sense that it is about a topic (and not a particular section of Scripture) and that it is relevant to what many of us have on our minds at this time of the year. I did the Willows devotion of 30 December last year (just the other day!) and am using it as a springboard for today's sermon. I titled that devotion 'Change is Possible' and its central verse was 2 Timothy 1:7, which reads

...for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.  
— 2 Timothy 1:7 [ESV]

In the devotion I said that the word translated as ‘fear’ could also be translated as ‘timidity’ and that this spirit of fear is contrasted with what God gives us, so what He gives is not timid!

Instead, we have *power*, we have *love*, and we have *self-control!* In this instance knowing the meaning of the original words gives us greater insight, so let’s take a look.

The word for ‘power’ is ‘dunamis’, the root word of which refers to force, but this is not the root word — it is an extension — and according to Strong’s concordance, ‘dunamis’ specifically refers to *miraculous* power. *That* is the kind of power that God gives us.

Then we have the word here translated as ‘love’. It is that very special kind: ‘agape’. It is God’s selfless and complete love... and it is part of the spirit which He gives us, so now we in turn can express that same kind of love. (Read 1 Corinthians chapter 13 if you want to know more about this kind of love.)

So that is the context in which we find the third component of the spirit which God gives us: self-control. In the devotion I pointed out that it is discipline in the context of self-control and a sound mind. So we have miraculous power and agape love being exercised in a disciplined manner through self-control in the context of a sound mind.

That’s quite a mouth-full, so I’ll say it again, slightly differently: God has given us a spirit of miraculous power and of agape love which is exercised in a disciplined manner through self-control in the context of a sound mind. Download the sermon text and spend some time thinking about these two phrasings and your life.

I stated above that this sermon is topical in that it addresses something which is often on our minds this time of the year, but actually it’s not just one topic — it is a whole range of topics which have a massive impact on your life and those around you.

This is important, so I am going to repeat it: *massive impact on your life and those around you.*

That is why the title of today’s sermon is:

The Christian Imperative
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## Sermon

‘The Christian imperative’... That’s quite a lofty title, so let’s unpack it. An imperative is ‘a factor or influence making something necessary’. That is the secondary meaning, which I am using here, at the beginning. By the end of this sermon we would have arrived at the primary meaning.

I want to set the scene with two verses of Scripture we all probably know. They are so important they have a title: The Great Commission.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.  
— Matthew 28:19&20 [ESV]

This is our imperative! It is the reason we are still here. How to we do this, though?

That is a very important answer to have, particularly when we read this:

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.  
— Ephesians 5:15–17 [ESV]

Three of the five devotions of this past week spoke directly to such topics as taking responsibility for your life, finding God’s purpose for your life, planning, and a whole lot else besides which could easily be taken as being perhaps a bit too similar to what the self-improvement crowd sells to great benefit (mostly their own).

I say this because there is a notion among many Christians that it is somehow wrong to plan our lives. Two favourite excerpts used to propagate this idea are from Jeremiah 29 (‘For I know the plans I have for you, declares The Lord...’) and this, from James:

Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’ — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Instead you ought to say, ‘If The Lord Wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.  
— James 3:13–16 [ESV]

I have repeatedly explained the context of the verse from Jeremiah, so won’t do so now, but note that James says: ‘If The Lord wills’, and ‘you boast in your arrogance.’ He is speaking about people who are not even asking God what His Will is, people who are arrogant and boastful. He is not saying ‘don’t plan’ by any stretch of the imagination.

Often people will also quote this:

For money is the root of all evil.

But that is not what the verse says; it is a miss-quote. The part they are quoting actually says this:

For **the love of** money is **a** root of all **kinds** of evils.  
— 1 Timothy 6:10(a) [ESV]

Even that is not all of it, as the entire verse reads:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.  
— 1 Timothy 6:10 [ESV]

Christ had a great deal to say about money — much more than merely ‘Render unto Caesar...’. Here is a sample:

One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful with the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?

And if you have not been faithful with that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?  
— Luke 16:10–12 [ESV]

So we need to be faithful and honest with little — practice, if you will — and only then will we be able to deal with much.

There is a parable which is applicable here:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish,

all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’  
— Luke 14:28–30 [ESV]

Sitting down and counting the cost. Today we would call that ‘quantity surveying’, and a lot of planning and knowledge of the situation is required.

We also see planning in the Old Testament. Chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Numbers outline in considerable detail how the Israelites set up and broke camp. It was — it *had* to be — an extremely organised affair. People had to arrive and leave in a particular order, and they had to camp in set places. Not doing so would have led to complete chaos.

Another example is in Exodus 18, where we see how Moses’s father-in-law popped in for a visit, and then ended up giving Moses sage advice about how to see to it that the task of judging should be done so that Moses wouldn’t end up with burn-out. Sure, that’s not the phrasing, but it’s the idea. Moses essentially told Jethro that he had to do all the judging because he knew ‘the statutes of God and His laws.’ Jethro’s response was direct:

What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.

Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you!  
— Exodus 18:17(b)–19(a) [ESV]

Then Jethro told Moses that he needs to get God's statutes to all the people and gave him the outline of how to create a hierarchy of people to judge disputes. He concluded:

...let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.

If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace.  
— Exodus 18:22&23 [ESV]

All of these Scriptures point to assessing the situation, planning, and then executing the plans, but this one from Proverbs shows us a more general application:

Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds, for riches do not last for ever; and does a crown endure to all generations?

When the grass is gone and the new growth appears and the vegetation of the mountains is gathered, the lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field.

There will be enough goats' milk for your food, for the food of your household and maintenance for your girls.  
— Proverbs 27:23–27 [ESV]

These four verses imply quite a lot. Knowing well the condition of your flocks and giving attention to your herds means that you have staff, with all the work which that entails: you need to feed the animals (and the staff), you need to see to lambing, to clothing, to selling at the right price, etc., etc. It's a lot of work, to be honest. Also, it doesn't just happen: you need to plan, execute, monitor, adapt, and involve yourself in all the other aspects of a business with many employees.

The reason I shared these Scriptures is because some people seem to think that talking about purpose, priorities, and planning, or taking seriously ideas such as vision, direction, and goals are somehow 'worldly'. That you almost need to wash your spiritual hands after dealing with such matters, especially money.

These Scriptures show us the Biblical mandate to be organised, to be disciplined, to seek God's Will and not our own. We need to understand that the free will which God has granted us applies to more than Salvation; it applies to a great deal more, and as with Salvation, we are free to choose how we will live our lives. Also as with Salvation, there are consequences to our choices... and God sets the consequences, not us.

There is one more point I wish to highlight from this passage in Proverbs, namely the sentence fragment ‘...for riches do not last for ever...’. No matter how well we manage, our situations will change. Paul puts it well in Philippians 4:

...I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound.

In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

— Philippians 4:11&12 [ESV]

Before we look at the next verse, I want to highlight some of the words used:

...I have **learned** in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound.

In any and every circumstance, I have **learned** the **secret** of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

— Philippians 4:11&12 [ESV]

Used in this way, ‘learned’ and ‘secret’ refer not only to moving from a state of not knowing to a state of knowing, but that it is part of an initiation, which logically would involve both an initiate as well as at least one party who is guiding the learning process. Notice that in this instance it involves not only knowledge transfer (which is relatively easy), but serves as catalyst for the resultant change as well (which is not easy at all to achieve).

Now that we have the context, let’s look at the key verse:

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

— Philippians 4:13 [ESV]

So Paul says that whether he has been brought low or whether he abounds, whether he is hungry or has plenty, he can do all things through Christ. That is victorious living! — and not a ‘name it, claim it, frame it’ attitude.

Please don’t think though that doing all these things will result in a trouble-free life. After all, Jesus Himself gave us these words:

I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

— John 16:33 [ESV]

Being organised and disciplined, having a sound mind, and exercising self-control will not make you impervious to tribulation (strong word, that), but it will help you be more efficient (which means using your resources better) as well as more effective (making a greater difference). Add to that what Paul wrote about contentment in Philippians 4, and you will be able to bear a lot more while being a nicer person to be around as well.

# Conclusion

At the beginning of this sermon I said: ‘If you have been following my devotions and sermons you will notice that today’s sermon will appear to be a major departure from one of my common threads, namely that of living in community, but that is not the case.’ The reason is simple, and harkens back to some of Christ’s most important words on this topic, which we find in Matthew 22. Jesus had just been asked, ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’, and this was His reply:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.  
— Matthew 22:37–40 [ESV]

Notice that there are three objects of love: firstly, we are to love God with our *entire* being; secondly, we are to love ourselves; thirdly, we are to love our neighbours *as* we love ourselves. If we do not love ourselves, then we will have a difficult time loving others. So my focus on self in this sermon is to enable us to love our neighbours.

I cannot stress this enough: the aim is to love others, and it is clear that we cannot do so unless we love ourselves.

Think about it: would you be in a good position to love others if you are stressed out, over-worked, trampled upon, have a low self-esteem, etc.? No. We can be in dire straits from a worldly perspective and yet be squarely in God’s Will. Regardless of our circumstances, our emotional state is important. I can guarantee you that Paul’s composure in all his trials and tribulations was a witness; if he had been a whimpering, snivelling ball of nerves no-one would have paid him any attention.

Yes, there are times that we will need the help of others, and to quote Craig Groeschel, ‘It’s not a sign of weakness to ask for help. It’s a sign of wisdom.’

I also said that we would arrive at the primary meaning of ‘imperative’, so here it is: ‘of vital importance; crucial’.

I believe that it is of vital importance and that it is crucial that we live lives which are efficient and effective for God’s Kingdom.

God takes us as we are and moulds us, but He also gives us freedom. He is the potter; we are the clay. Let Him mould you.

Now I want to give you pointers to resources which can help you in achieving this. In fact, my aim with this sermon is to help you get to the point of action. I have read book after book about this, but my personal track record of implementation is, bluntly, dismal. So I invite you to go on

the same journey I am on, and want to leave you with pointers to some resources. You will find a list of books in the PDF of the sermon notes. These books are written by Christians and from a Christian perspective. That is not the only reason I chose them, though. I also chose them because they are good, so I want to give you a quick run-down of each.

If you are going to love yourself, then it means looking after yourself, especially when it's difficult because other people have a different agenda for you (few would use those words, but that's what it boils down to). This is from the blurb of the book's 2017 edition:

- Can I set limits and still be a loving person?
- What are legitimate boundaries?
- How do I effectively manage my digital life so that it doesn't control me?
- What if someone is upset or hurt by my boundaries?
- How do I answer someone who wants my time, love, energy, or money?
- Why do I feel guilty or afraid when I consider setting boundaries?
- How do boundaries relate to mutual submission within marriage?
- Aren't boundaries selfish?

The book's title?: 'Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life'. It seems that most committed Christians have a real problem here — it is difficult to find the balance between true self-love and selfishness. There is a difference though, and it is as great as the difference between righteousness and right deeds, so it is important to get right.

Before moving to the next book I need to sound a warning: over the last number of years a veritable industry has sprung up around this topic of boundaries, one which abuses terms from clinical psychology. If you are not a clinical psychologist, be very careful about how you label people, because you can do real damage. To misappropriate a well-known quote: 'Just because you're offended doesn't mean you're right.'

The next book is 'Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth', which is an absolute classic. What is so important about it is how the author approaches what the sub-title says. This is not a self-help book which tries to convince you how wonderful you are, but gives you tools to walk the path of true spiritual growth as a Christian. It's not a book you can skim, so understand that it will take time to work through and listen for God's still, small voice as you do so.

Some of us aren't really readers, and this next book is written in a very approachable style by the pastor of one of the largest churches in the world. I mention that because he is an excellent communicator. The title is 'Divine Direction: 7 Decisions that will change your life'. Don't let the approachable style either fool you or put you off: the essence of this book is excellent. I'd recommend you read this before the next one, which is a treasure trove of practicality.

This next book is 'Disciplines of a Godly Man'. It, too, is a classic, but be sure to get the latest edition. At the moment (beginning of 2022), that is from 2019 and it is called 'Updated Edition with Study Guide'. Don't get the revised edition, which is 20 years old. He co-authored (with his wife) a similar book called 'Disciplines of a Godly Woman', but I have not read any of it.



I have one business book in this list, as a great deal of it is applicable to us all. In fact, the first three chapters are pretty much required reading if you are going to figure out what to focus on in your life and why. I would buy it for just those chapters alone. It is called ‘Entreleadership: 20 Years of Practical Business Wisdom from the Trenches’.

The last book in the list is ‘24/6: A prescription for a healthier, happier life.’ It is an easy read and contains insight and wisdom gained from the author being an Emergency Room doctor for many years while also being chief of medical staff at the hospital where he practised. The reason for the title is that God has called us not to a 24/7 life, but a 24/6 one: the Sabbath is a physical and mental requirement. This is no small matter. If you disagree, read 2 Chronicles 36:15–21, paying attention to why specifically seventy years is mentioned.

I want to end with these words of Christ in Luke 12:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.  
—Luke 12:48(b) [NIV]

Would the worship team please come up now? (It’s going to be a short prayer.) I will lead us in that beautiful modern hymn called ‘Glory (Let there be peace)’. Its central take-away is ‘let it start with me’, referring to the message of Christ, the Saviour.

Those who are watching or listening to a recording of this sermon can find the link to the song in the PDF.

[Matt Maher - Glory \(Let There Be Peace\) \(\[Official Lyric Video\]\)](#)

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With that, let us pray.

*Almighty God, Creator of all there is, I believe I speak for us all when I say that we come to You in gratitude for Your guiding Hand in our lives. Even so, Lord, we acknowledge that our stewardship of the resources with which You have so richly blessed us leaves much to be desired; that we often fall short of Your plan for our lives.*

*Please help us to offer our lives to You in full assurance of Your Love and care for us. We are safe with You, and Your Will is the best possible way — there is none better. Help us too, Lord, to be content in any and every situation, that our lives may attract questions; the answers to which allow us to lead others to Your Light, to the glory of Your Name.*

*Amen*

# References & Recommended Reading

- Strong's numbers (used to look up the meanings of words in the original languages): <https://biblehub.com/strongs.htm>

There is a surfeit of non-Christian books on these matters, but the following seven are written by Christians and from a Christian perspective.

- Cloud, Henry and Townsend, John, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*. You are going to need it if you want your intended changes to stick.
- Foster, Richard J, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. An absolute classic. This gives such a good Spiritual perspective to discipline.
- Groeschel, Craig, *Divine Direction: 7 Decisions that will change your life*. Don't let the approachable style either fool you or put you off: the essence of this book is excellent.
- Hughes, R Kent, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. Get the 'Updated Edition with Study Guide'. At the moment (beginning of 2022) that is from 2019. If you want a very well structured book with how-to woven into it, then this is it. He co-authored (with his wife) a similar book called *Disciplines of a Godly Woman*.
- Ramsey, Dave, *EntreLeadership*. Though focussed on the workplace, most is applicable in your daily life as well. The first three chapters are pure gold.
- Sleeth, Matthew, *24/6: A prescription for a healthier, happier life*. An easy read and incredible wisdom gained from being an Emergency Room doctor.