

Sermon Title: “**Halloween- A Time to Shine?**”

Series: *Learn, Live, Lead*

Speaker: Pastor Damian Mericka

Text: **Topical Message with Supporting Text**

## Introduction

*“Stand firm, and you will win life.” -**Luke 21:19***

We began this year with a look at what Kingdom endurance is. ***Standing Firm*** here means *Endurance* and is a very rich word embodying an ***upward, consistent, contagious, and outward*** motion that goes against the current. *It is swimming upstream after Jesus.* We saw this is the work the Spirit of God does in our lives, just as He did in Jesus’ - He leads us upward to higher ground and a higher life in Him.

We also looked at some of the outward challenges we face when going upward with the Spirit, including the spiritual forces of darkness which our on their way downward. As they are being cast out of God ’s Kingdom, we are being brought in. This is the nature of our Spiritual Battle. Unlike the generations that came before Jesus since His Ascension the Spirit has now come upon us to take the battle to where it truly is at.

What does this look like lived out in or lives? Following Jesus as His Disciples.



*“Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.”*

**-Matthew 4:19**

This series is set to be a journey answering this question- *what does it mean to follow Jesus?* How do we today answer His invitation and see this journey with Him unfold as it did for the first-generation followers of Jesus? Together we will discover anew what it means to follow Jesus- *to be a disciple making disciples culture that **learns, lives, and leads!***

### **I. Opportunity or Cheap Knock Off? (John 10:14-18)**

*“I am the Good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

**-John 10:14-18**

This time of the year was always fun for me as a child growing up. It was the beginning of the final quarter of the year and back-to-back holidays. This meant days off from school, visiting family, gifts, and candy. And it all began with *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*. It was time to dress up in costumes and go Trick-or-Treating.

This sequence of tradition continued for me as I grew until we (my family) transitioned to a Reformed Church and my dad announced we would no longer be participating in Halloween, *for religious reasons*. Instead, we would gather with other church kids and celebrate *Neewollah* which turned out to be a *really* sad knock off on what we experienced with Halloween. Cheesy music, depressing games, and the guess which Bible character / Reformer each of us dressed up as.

It was here that I was introduced to the Christian tradition of trying to replicate things of the world with Jesus wrapping paper on it. From book series, music, movies- Christianity here in the US showed the world that we are not the ones you invite to parties. Mostly because we not only will *not* come, but we will attempt a cheap knock off *for religious reasons*.

Understand- there are non-negotiables that the Bible is very clear on. Theology that we must agree and submit to otherwise it is no longer Christianity. Salvation by faith in Christ alone- *a non-negotiable*. The reality of sin and the believer's directive to be Holy as our God is Holy- *a non-negotiable*. That said, while the Bible is the Living Word of God, it was written 2,000 years ago in the Middle East and as a result does not directly speak into everything that we face in our world today allowing for gray areas where we, as believers, are going to disagree on what it looks like to follow Jesus in and through.

*Halloween*, and more specifically *trick-or-treating*, is one of those gray areas. Gray in the sense we cannot look Halloween up in our concordance and find a verse directly addressing it. Yet, the Bible fully resources us to navigate everything in this world- and we have an enemy whose tactics do not change. Yet greater, we have Jesus who is the same yesterday, today, and forever- the victorious Messiah!

I understand we will not all arrive to an agreed position to take on Halloween- but this message is an attempt to clear the air on the origin, evolution of traditions, and show the possible opportunity for the Kingdom this represents for Believers today. My heart in this is to present to you the truth behind all the tradition so that we can prayerfully lead our families and speak into our ministry fields with the Love of Jesus at the leading of The Spirit.

In our text, Jesus didn't put up a fence and wait for the sheep to wander into it. Jesus went out into the world, *God in the flesh*, and spoke our language. In this we have both seen and heard the voice of the Good Shepherd and have become a part of His flock. We are not in a fold away from the world, we are still in the fold's (geography) where we were saved in and in turn the Good Shepherd speaks out with invitation through us for others to hear.

Again, while in this world we are to be Holy, as Jesus says,

*“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”*

**-John 17:14-18**

**Learning from Jesus, Living like Jesus, and Leading others to Jesus** is why we are here and why the world will push back against us. It hated Jesus then and it still hates Him now. So guess what- if we are *following* Him, *sounding like* Him, *doing* the works He did- the world is going to push back against us. Yet, Jesus, knowing this, prayed that we would remain in this world of hate and be preserved from the evil one- while spreading the message of His Kingdom.

So- as Christians in this world, is Halloween / Trick-or-treating harmless fun and opportunity for us to share Jesus’ love, is it something we need to pull back from and provide an alternative (cheap knock off) to, or is it something we should avoid and disassociate ourselves all together from? Let’s dive more into this.

## **II. Then and Now- The Journey from Pagan Ritual to American CHA-CHINGS!**

### **Jerusalem -> Rome -> Europe -> America**

All people of any culture of any generation have found value in honoring people and events by setting aside days, making them distinct or holy. Commemorating victory, honoring deities, or dealing with sorrow and loss, holy days or holidays were a way to hold on to what is valued. What is unique about Christianity is that it is a faith that spans peoples and cultures, absorbing and assimilating diversity into the fold of Christ.

While the Church began in Jerusalem as we saw in our series through the Book of Acts, the Mission of Jesus drove believers to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Since both Peter and Paul were imprisoned in Rome before their martyrdom, the church there brought questions to them and delivered the response from them to believers, allowing the church at Rome to become the go-to for direction. Later, after the death of the original Apostles, Rome came to embrace Christianity under the Emperor Constantine around 313 AD (or CE). The City of Rome as the Capital of the Empire allowed for the church of Rome to become the capital of the church. It was here Christianity would take a more rigid shape looking a lot like the Empire that once persecuted her.

Holy days were beginning to be established, replacing the pagan holidays celebrated by the formerly pagan Empire. As Rome deteriorated and finally fell in 476 AD, Christianity had been spreading, reaching well into Northern Europe. As Rome would conquer and assimilate a people, the Roman Catholic Church would move forward in the same breath and stride. One of the ways the church would assimilate culture is by taking their holy days and bringing Christian meaning and value to them.

One of the holy days we want to look at is the *All-Saints Day*, which was begun by Pope Boniface IV on May 13, 609 AD. In Europe there was much widespread religious practice that was damaging to those placing faith in Christ. In Northern Europe there was a strong Celtic presence which marked the calendar by the seasons with festivities celebrating each. For the Fall festival time crops would be harvested and cattle who would not make it through the winter were slaughtered as darker, colder days would settle in.

During this Celtic festival time three days were marked, *October 31<sup>st</sup>- November 2<sup>nd</sup>*. It was during this time called the *Samhain*, that the curtain separating life and death would be lifted and allow death and life to mingle. Those once alive but now dead would roam the earth again. Fear fueled superstition and ideas became beliefs. Beliefs such as the dead will haunt until something is provided for them to transition to the *other side*. If such wandering spirits were not *treated* well they would bring *tricks* upon the living.

Other rituals that would surface in this three-day season of haunting were the wearing of costumes to look like the dead and fool them, or carving out vegetables / gourds and lighting a candle inside to scare them off. Even with the teaching of Scripture, it was very difficult to combat the ignorance and fear deeply seated in these cultures due to family practice and customs. To further combat this Pope Gregory IV moved the *All Saints Day* to this 3 day festival affording the Christian alternative. *We cannot stop the practice, but we can detour their focus!*

Over time the mingling of Christianity would take the place of custom but not fear. The Church would leverage the fear by identifying the demonic presence and the need for the authority of the Church and her clergy, for a price, that alone could ward off its power and influence. This would reach over into America with the migration of the working class in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century bringing such practices here. Further along in time, Hollywood would take the reigns to commercialize with fun (It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown) and marketing would capitalize and *cha-ching: another money-making holiday is born!*

*What I want to focus on with this is their focus on death and life with this ritual observance. The idea that death, while it is a part of life, is not the end. This underlies their custom, and while there is the fear of unhappy spirits, there is also the longing of reunion for those once loved but now gone. The idea of a curtain coming down separating life and death, a three-day observance of death and life, along with the power of light to drive away darkness- does any of this sound familiar to us?*

I am often confronted with the statement, *Pastor why does Christianity sound like other pagan beliefs?* I believe we are not asking the question correctly. Though Christianity began with Jesus, the story of redemption originated in the mind of God before He spoke anything into creation (as we are seeing with our Gospel Triumphant Series). The real question to ask is *why do pagan beliefs sound like God's story?* The answer to this question is deception. Sin, the spiritual realm, demons, and deception are very real present forces in the world we occupy. And while they are present, they are defeated and eventually will be cast out forever.

I want to argue that this is prime ground for us as believers to shine the light of the Gospel, not in leveraging fear-based faith, but in showing that death is indeed not the end, and that in Christ death is conquered and a new day in Him without end is coming!

### **III. Knowledge that Puffs Up or Love that Builds Up? (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)**

*“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” **-1 Corinthians 8:1***

Note that both knowledge and love move in a common direction- upward. Knowing what the right thing is to do can guide our own lives, love guides others in the right direction. We need both; one without the other is empty regarding the reason Jesus has left us in this world. Similar to our navigation of this gray area of Halloween, Paul is navigating questions the Corinthian believers are having in their own gray areas.

Meat offered to idols. There were two aspects to this custom Paul addresses.

1) *Dining in the Temple Restaurant.* Temples in the First Century Roman Empire functioned differently than we would think today. They were places of sacrifice to deities along with places to sell and market goods, engage in harlotry, or dine on the leftovers from the service of the Priests. Temples were more like immoral mini malls that existed to fund their endeavors; a place for friends to gather and participate. To this Paul had issue,

*“No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” **-1 Corinthians 10:20-22***

2) *Meat from the Temple market served at home.* Meat that was dedicated or sacrificed to idols that went unused by the priests or served in the restaurant would go to the market often at markdown prices competitive to meat that did not make the journey. To this believers were serving or being invited into homes where this meat was on the table. Do we eat or not? It is hear Paul address with **1 Corinthians 8.**

*“Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one. (v.4) However, not all possess this knowledge. (v.7) But take care that this right (mature knowledge) of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (new to faith). For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (Vv. 9-13)*



Paul is making a distinction here that we need to take note of. We can know the truth and walk in our liberty or freedom in Christ at the expense of those presently family or soon to be family in Christ. Love is the foundation where knowledge is nurtured in us in a way that nurtures those around us in our witness as lights in a pagan setting for Jesus.

There are factors of whether believers are going to the Temple restaurant to dine and fellowship or if it's meat from those places sold and brought into homes for consumption. Do you see the difference? Further, Paul focuses on the heart posture of those in Christ toward each other. Love must rule the day in how we live out our knowledge of God in Christian liberty.

#### **IV. Dividing the Good from the Bad (Deuteronomy 18:10-15)**

*“There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God, for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers-it is to him you shall listen-.”*

#### **-Deuteronomy 18:10-15**

This passage is often sourced as the reason believers should not participate in Halloween. Just as understanding the history of the tradition is important, so should be the context of the passage we are citing. Here God through Moses is reminding them that there are many voices besides His own that will be speaking into their lives. *They are to listen to His alone for the direction in what they believe and how they live.* One voice alone leads to life; the others to death. I included verse 15 because it is a part of what God is saying- wait on Him, trust His Word, and obey what He says.

Witches and witchcraft are still present in our world today, magic along with other forms of violent evil also partner with this day of Halloween. Horror and mutilation, torture, and death, along with distorted returns from death such as zombies fill the stories told for this event. Demons and satan are said to lay claim on this day, this night.

**The question I face as a follower of Jesus- is there redeemable value in any part of what Halloween is?**

If you choose to have your fortune read, check the papers for your horoscopes, sacrifice children, practice witchcraft, seek the voice of loved ones after they have died- we are disobeying God here and choosing a voice other than His. Further, I truly struggle with those who say they follow Jesus and enjoy watching blood and gore horror such as *Saw, Nightmare on Elm Street, Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, Hellraiser, etc* which are novelty movies during this season of Halloween. (Which btw if satan truly hates us because we bear God's Image, why do you think

these movies where this Image is distorted grotesquely are pushed so much on us culturally?) However, do such extreme atrocities define the whole?

I caution us to not throw out the whole of this cultural observance too quickly. Certainly, there are aspects we must disagree with; yea aspects we must not be found to participate in. Again, as we reflect on the history of this day, while tainted with cultic influences has been redeemed with the light of Christ's love in times past by the church. It was the Gospel's way of reaching into the context of culture with resurrection redemption. *Can it be redeemed today? **Should it be redeemed today?***

**V. Jesus Alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life-so SHINE BRIGHTLY IN HIM!**

*“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’ **-2 Corinthians 4:6***

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.” **-John 14:6-7***

As your Pastor, my encouragement in how we can respond to our cultures observance of Halloween as believers left in this world by Jesus is this: *to shine the light of His love into it!*

**3 Final Considerations toward your decision** (Adapted from a GTY article, *Christians & Halloween*)

- **First**, Christians should not respond to Halloween like superstitious pagans. Pagans are superstitious; Christians are enlightened by the truth of God's Word. Evil spirits are no more active and sinister on Halloween than they are on any other day of the year; in fact, any day is a good day for Satan to prowl about seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). But "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). God has forever "disarmed principalities and powers" through the cross of Christ and "made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them through [Christ]" (Colossians 2:15).
- **Second**, Christians should respond to Halloween with cautionary wisdom. Some people fear the activity of Satanists or pagan witches, but the actual incidents of satanic-associated crime are very low. The real threat on Halloween is from the social problems that attend sinful behavior—drunk driving, pranksters and vandals, and unsupervised children. Like any other day of the year, Christians should exercise caution as wise stewards of their possessions and protectors of their families. Christian young people should stay away from secular Halloween parties since those are breeding grounds for trouble. Christian parents can protect their children by keeping them well-supervised and restricting treat consumption to those goodies received from trusted sources.
- **Third**, Christians should respond to Halloween with gospel compassion. The unbelieving, Christ rejecting world lives in perpetual fear of death. It isn't just the experience of death, but rather what the Bible calls "a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume [God's] adversaries" (Hebrews 10:27). Witches, ghosts, and evil spirits are not terrifying; God's wrath unleashed on the unforgiven sinner—now that is truly terrifying.

We are all faced with this custom in our Country. How we will face it may differ. But in all that we choose, *it must emanate from a heart of love*. Whether we refuse to participate at all and keep our porch light off, participate in alternatives such as reformation fun or Neewollah, or carefully and in ways that are Christ honoring participate in our neighborhoods and communities- let us seek Christ's good in the lives of our neighbors. There is tremendous evangelistic opportunity in front of us.

Ultimately, Christian participation in Halloween is a matter of conscience before God. Whatever level of Halloween participation you choose, you must honor God by keeping yourself separate from the world and by showing mercy to those who are perishing. Halloween provides the Christian with the opportunity to accomplish both of those things in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's a message that is holy, set apart from the world; it's a message that is the very mercy of a forgiving God. What better time of the year is there to share such a message than Halloween?