

The background is a dark navy blue with a fine, grainy texture. A faint, glowing grid of thin lines, colored in a mix of orange and pink, is visible across the entire image. In the center, there is a wireframe globe with a grid of latitude and longitude lines. The globe is semi-transparent, revealing a dark silhouette of a world map underneath. Overlaid on the globe is the text "CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The word "CENTER" is on the top line, "OF THE" is smaller and centered on the second line, and "UNIVERSE" is on the third line. Surrounding the central globe are several geometric shapes: two orange triangles in the top-left corner, a solid orange circle in the top-right, a large orange semi-circle on the right edge, two pink triangles in the bottom-left corner, and a pink triangle in the bottom-right corner.

# **CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE**



# HOW TO USE OUR MINISTRY PASS SERMON SERIES GUIDES

## WHAT THIS GUIDE IS NOT

- This guide isn't a set of sermon manuscripts. While sermon manuscripts can be both useful and a powerful training tool, our sermon series guides are different. Rather than tell you what to say, our aim is for this material to spark your imagination, assist you in planning your sermon, and offer a boost to your study time.
- This guide isn't ironclad. While we hope you use our material, the pieces of this document are designed to be moved, tweaked, and altered. As you study the suggested passages, and pray through your message, this guide will hopefully be a launching pad, rather than a landing net.

## WHAT THIS GUIDE IS

Included in each guide is:

- A sermon series outline that breaks up the teaching set into a specific number of weeks.
- A "big idea" of the series.
- A passage, "big idea" of the sermon, topic list, and a number of illustrations and talking point ideas are included in each weekly section. The "Sermon Ideas and Talking Points" area is filled with observations about the text, relevant applications, creative ideas, and illustrations.
- A small group discussion sheet (located in a separate document in this bundle).

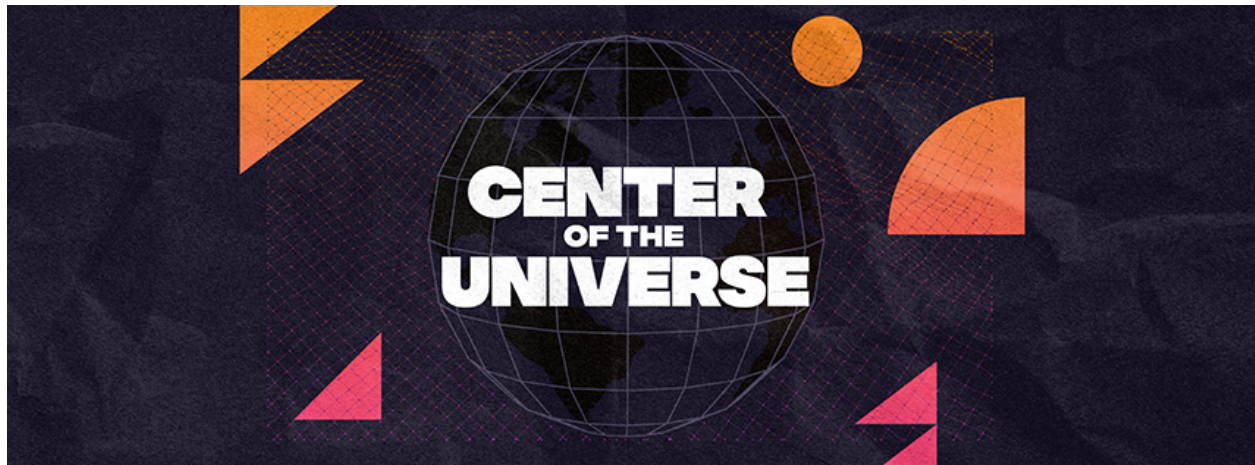
## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- Plan ahead. Our guides are best utilized in advance versus the day or night before. Read over the ideas and illustrations provided, thinking through how you can possibly utilize them in your message. We've purposely kept our guides simple so as to give you the best opportunity to create your own, unique message.
- While we give you a passage and "big idea" of the message, take time to study the text.
- Utilize the media contained in this bundle to promote and communicate your series message.

*Note: Although we've worked hard to verify the accuracy of the material in this guide, we encourage all pastors to carefully review the information before sharing it with their congregation.*



**MINISTRY PASS**



## Center of the Universe

**Big Idea of the Series:** News flash: you are not the center of the universe, and that's good news! The world is not about us. Rather, we are a part of a bigger story—God's story. This four-week series explores how Jesus deserves his place at the center of the believer's life, how the believer can get over themselves and put others first, use their God-given giftings, and withstand the hard times in life.

### Week 1

**Text:** Colossians 1:15–20

**Topic(s):** Jesus, Preeminence, Reconciliation

**Big Idea of the Message:** Jesus surpasses all others, and it is through him that the big-picture plan to reconcile all things comes to fruition.

**Application Point:** The best life lived is the one with Jesus at the center.

### Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. In this passage the apostle Paul is laying out who Christ is. He is “the image of God” (v. 15), the one by whom “all things were created” (v. 16), and the head of the church (v. 18). He is “before all things, and in him all things hold together” (v. 17). He is superior above all (v. 18), he is God (v. 19), and it is through him that all things are reconciled into rightness “by the blood of his cross” (v. 20). To be reconciled means that there is a change in the relationship. For us, it means that all that went wrong has been made right because of Jesus. It is important to remember that Paul is making sure the Colossians know the truth that Christ is God. Matthew Henry notes, “As God he speaks of him, v. 15–17. (1.) He is the *image of the invisible God*. Not as man was made *in the image of God* (Gen. 1:27), in his natural faculties and dominion over the creatures: no, he is the express image of his person, Heb. 1:3. ... (2.) He is the *first-born of every creature*. Not that he is himself a creature; for [he is] ... *begotten before all the creation*, or before any creature was made, which is the scripture-way of representing eternity. ... (3.) He is so far from beginning himself a creature that he is the Creator. ... (4.) He *was before all things*. He had a being before the

world was made, before the beginning of time, and therefore from all eternity. ... (5.) *By him all things consist*. They not only subsist in their beings, but consist in their order and dependences. He not only created them all at first, but it is by the word of his power that they are still upheld, Heb. 1:3" (Matthew Henry,

*Commentary on Colossians 1*,

[https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Col/Col\\_001.cfm?a=1108015](https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Col/Col_001.cfm?a=1108015)). Jesus is the God-man who accomplishes God's plan.

2. Through Jesus, every person can experience reconciliation with God. This is something we could not achieve on our own, and it is not something for which we can take credit (Ephesians 2:8–9). The believer deeply understands that in matters of salvation we really are not in control, capable, or dogged enough to overcome our greatest vices and supply our greatest need. We absolutely require something, someone, outside of ourselves to be the sustainer and center of life. And there is such a one! That is good news.
3. It is embarrassing how easily we believers move from total dependence on God for salvation to bumping him out of his role as Lord in our lives. We lose sight of the fact that what is going on in the world is much bigger than what we will see and experience. Even at our best, as we try to do things right for the greater good, knowing that life is eternal, we can still be self-centered instead of God-centered. One way to recognize this tendency is to take notice when we get irritated by minor inconveniences, like waiting in line for lunch or running late to school because our sibling was hogging the bathroom. Jared Wilson writes, "I wake up this way. I bet you do too. We wake up in self-sovereignty mode. Then we get frustrated because we keep running into people who think they're the center of the universe. It's frustrating. What a splendid mercy, even if a severe one, then, when Jesus gives us a hard shove out of our own makeshift thrones, and all the little planets we've set in orbit around us fall down—thump. thump. thump. thump. thump" (Jared C. Wilson, "I Am the Center of the Universe," *The Gospel Coalition*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/jared-c-wilson/i-am-the-center-of-the-universe/>).
4. Even though young people are on the edge of independence, most days are carefully curated routines controlled by others. School schedules dictate the majority of the weekday. Extracurricular practices, jobs, and homework take up early morning and evening hours. Throw in family expectations and friendships, and there doesn't seem to be a lot that they have control over. They pass through the daily cycle of life bouncing off the circumstances of the day like a ball in a pinball machine. So they assert themselves in a million different little acts of control to try to hone out their identity—what they wear, who they listen to, the things they sign up for, the people they hang out with, the way they argue with their parents or teachers. It's exhausting to be both a child and an adult trying to navigate the ever-changing expectations of everyone. This passage reminds us that we do not have to strive to live up to the expectations that hover over us. We also don't have to carry the burden of control. Instead, we can practice giving it all up to the one who was designed for the task. We can actively give Christ the reins through prayer, journaling, evaluating our motivations, and being in fellowship with other believers. We can allow God to shape us as we grow into

the people he wants us to be, without trying to force it. There is freedom in giving it all to God and letting him be the main character of the story. With him at the center, he is our guiding light. It is in and through him that we discover who we truly are and how to live out a life that isn't determined by social media standards but by the standards of God.

5. In the movie *Bruce Almighty*, a struggling newsman, Bruce, complains to God about how bad God is doing at his job. So God gives Bruce a week to be God. As God expected, things don't go well, and everything ends up in chaos. Bruce cries out to God, and when God shows up, he chuckles, stating the obvious: being God is not as easy as we might think. Bruce replies, "They are all out of control! It's mayhem. I don't know what to do." Bruce tells God that he received so many requests that he "just gave them all what they wanted," to which God answers, "Yeah, but since when does anyone have a clue about what they want?" (*Bruce Almighty*, directed by Tom Shadyac, written by Steve Koren, Mark O'Keefe, and Steve Oedekerk [Universal Studios, 2003], Amazon Prime, 1:17:02–1:18:35). Being human makes it hard for us to truly see what God can accomplish in the good, the difficult, the big moments, and the everyday moments. When we can humbly submit to God's will and rest in his goodness, we no longer have to carry it all on our shoulders. We can be content, knowing that in Christ our burden is light (Matthew 11:30).
6. This word study video from The Bible Project explores the big picture idea of peace (v. 20) and how we experience and actively participate in it: <https://youtu.be/oLYORLZOaZE>.

## **Week 2**

**Text:** Philippians 2:1–10

**Topic(s):** Humility, Identity, Service

**Big Idea of the Message:** Jesus showed the world what living in humility looked like.

**Application Point:** For the believer, centering their life on God means serving others and cultivating true humility.

## **Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:**

1. A quick scan of Instagram and the pursuit of #livingmybestlife looks a lot like self-indulgence, carefully staged outfits, perfect hair and makeup, brand new Yeezys, dream vacations, and unattainable versions of whatever the American teenage life has supposedly morphed into. This article explores the origin of the phrase "Live your best life" and how it permeates pop culture (Ramia, "What it Actually Means to 'Live Your Best Life,'" *Medium*, August 2, 2018, <https://medium.com/@ramiamitch/what-it-actually-means-to-live-your-best-life-9060617a969f>).
2. The biblical passage in our study challenges the idea that our best lives are lived through a self-focused life. In Philippians 2, Paul encourages the church to be humble and put others first (v. 3), just as Jesus did. Even though he was God, Jesus "emptied himself" (v. 7) to live as a man and die on a cross (v. 8). Jesus gave up everything, to offer life to all. As we play a part in advancing the gospel



in our world, we should follow Jesus's example by giving of our lives—our time, energy, and resources—to help point others to God.

3. There are many ways to lose ourselves. First, we can lose ourselves in the pursuit of power, by being the center of our own universe. Or we can lose ourselves under the mask of trying to look like a super nice person. Both are grasping to control how the story goes. On one side we strive to control our own world and manifest our own destinies by the power of self-sufficiency. On the other side, we become a glorified doormat by deferring everything in the name of others. We lay our giftings and talents, opinions and dreams, on an altar of self-martyrdom; if we never assert ourselves, we think we will never disappoint God or others. In either instance, we don't have to be bothered to rely on God to direct and guide us. The reality is that just because we don't run the show, we still are a vital part of the program. God does not ask us to become less of ourselves, but instead asks us to become the best of ourselves through him. The key is being in relationship with him, staying connected and ready to respond to him as he prompts us.
4. True humility is found by having an accurate view of our need for Christ and an accurate view of our identity in him as people who bear the image of God. While we might not be the boss, we do have a part to play in God's big picture. We are valuable and loved, equipped and gifted (which we will talk about later in the series), ready to do good works that he has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10). Finding our identity in Christ and following his example helps us to humbly obey God and serve others—not as penance or punishment but as partners in the work of reconciling all humanity to him. This perspective shift is what allows Paul, who is imprisoned, to write this letter of encouragement to the Philippians. Paul reminds the people of Philippi, that “what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). He does not minimize the reality; sometimes it is very hard to humbly submit to God's will, but he does recognize that his best life is lived in service to God and others.
5. The second season of the Netflix series *Iron Fist* shows it's lead character Danny on a path toward humility, a path that results in him giving up his powers to his girlfriend, Colleen, knowing he isn't worthy of them. K. B. Hoyle explores how the imbalance of power. Hoyle writes, “For Danny, stepping down and stepping back is an act of deference, a cultivation of the virtue of humility, which is underscored by his offering the fist to a woman, who often find themselves at the mercy of more powerful men. *Iron Fist* season 2 indirectly speaks a message of truth not only about how power itself should be handled with great care, but about imbalances of power between men and women and how the cultivation of the virtue of humility can help heal the hurts of our current age” <https://christandpopculture.com/iron-fist-and-the-cultivation-of-humility/> . While we may not wield a superhero's iron fist, we all have influence and power over others. It is our responsibility to discern how and when to defer for the sake of others, in the name of the gospel.

### Week 3

**Text:** 1 Corinthians 12:4–27

**Topic(s):** Service, Church, Spiritual Gifts

**Big Idea of the Message:** God has equipped every believer to be an integral part of growing the kingdom.

**Application Point:** We each have an important and active part to play in God's story.

#### Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. We cannot and should not try to do God's job for him. Instead, we can find fulfillment and meaning by playing an integral part in God's kingdom. Part of knowing how to do that is understanding that God has uniquely created you and equipped you with important skills, talents, and most importantly, the Holy Spirit. This isn't about working for God, to earn his favor or make up for our mistakes. Irv Busenitz reminds us that we all have a job description, but we need not overly complicate things, "Jewish history said that there were 613 laws that needed to be obeyed, but Jesus reduced them to two: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind' and 'you should love your neighbor as yourself' (Matthew 22:37, 39)." Earlier in the book of Corinthians, Paul lines out what Busenitz calls our "job prescription": "reflect the glory of God," "seek the benefit of others," "seek the salvation of the lost," and seek to be more like Jesus (Irv Busenitz, "The Christian's Job Description" [blog], *The Masters Seminary*, November 20, 2017, <https://blog.tms.edu/christians-job-description>).
2. In this passage, we learn that we are indeed qualified to do the things that God sets before us to complete, through the Holy Spirit, who is responsible for moving in the hearts of people to confess "Jesus is Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:1–3). Not everyone will be equipped with the same giftings; they are varied (vv. 4–6). The gifts are given by the Spirit "for the common good" (vv. 6–7). Paul gives a sampling, but not an exhaustive list of different kinds of gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, speaking in different languages, and interpreting languages (vv. 8–10). They are all given by the Holy Spirit, as he decides (v. 11). Paul continues using the human body as a metaphor for how purposefully believers, the church, are to work together in order to function well as God's representatives. There is no distinguishing based on race or social hierarchy (v. 12–13). Just as every part of the body is important, every person is necessary and should be unified, honored, and encouraged in the work (vv. 14–27).
3. Professor and author Michael Horton reminds us that the gifts are not for our own needs but for what others need: "This is not my spiritual thing, like, Am I a Libra or a Capricorn?" (<https://youtu.be/CEZuykO4f8I>).
4. Church is a bit like a family reunion. You don't get to pick who is invited. Family is family. The church family is sometimes just as weird, messed up, and uncomfortable as the most awkward family gatherings, but God is still at work. Each person is valued, and each person's gifting is vital to the church. We all share one commonality: salvation. This is a bond that allows us to move past

minor irritations (not sin issues) and work together for the sake of others and the furthering of the gospel.

5. A scary situation was unfolding as police on the scene waited for a rescue boat. Nine swimmers were trapped in a rip current and running out of time. Swift thinking and teamwork saved the day when over eighty people joined together to form a human chain in the Gulf of Mexico to save the swimmers:  
<https://youtu.be/h5l6lecv9JY>.
6. It is easy to move from living and moving *in* Christ to doing things *for* Christ. It is in these times when being part of a church (Matthew 18:20) helps us stay connected to God, instead of living out of our own pride, ambition, or self-sufficiency. As much as sometimes we would like to be done with the entire church, its failings, hurts, and mistakes, we are reminded of its importance: "First, the church is the context for our union with Jesus. The church is not merely a building or a community of people—it exists in union with Christ, and union with Christ means that you can't say 'Jesus, yes. Church, no.' When you are united to Christ, you are put into a family. There are no 'only children' in the kingdom. ... Second, if the church is the primary context for abiding in Christ, then baptism in the church enacts our union with him. ... Finally, the Lord's Supper nurtures our union with Christ. If union is God's embrace of us, then Communion is our throwing ourselves into the arms of his loving embrace" (Julie Canlis, "The Bible's Best Description of Salvation Is a Phrase We Rarely Use," *Christianity Today*, January 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2019/january/bibles-best-description-salvation-is-phrase-we-rarely-use.html>).

#### **Week 4**

**Text:** Psalm 37:1–40

**Topic(s):** Struggle, Wickedness, Justice

**Big Idea of the Message:** God remains good and faithful even when the world is a mess and the wicked seem to prosper.

**Application Point:** The believer can have hope when God doesn't seem to make sense.

#### **Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:**

1. There will inevitably be times in a believer's life when being a part of God's story is confusing, difficult, and exhausting. The little kids in [this video](#) don't understand the grown-ups in their lives. Similarly, we don't always understand what God is doing.
2. Psalm 37 is authored by David. He is encouraging us not to let the prosperity of the wicked get to us, but instead to trust in God and his justice. He reminds us that we shouldn't envy the evildoers, because their time of success is limited (vv. 1–2). Instead, we should trust in the Lord, centering our lives on God and submitting to his will (vv. 3–8). He tells them that the wicked will be justly punished by a strong God who sustains the righteous (vv. 9–22). We ought not be jealous for "better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of



many wicked” (v. 16). God cares for those who live justly. He delights in them, so they should continue to do the right thing, even in the face of hardship (vv. 23–31). There is conflict between the wicked and the righteous (vv. 32–40), but God “is their stronghold in the time of trouble” (v. 39), he will deliver them, and they can “take refuge in him” (v. 40).

3. Psalm 37 is an acrostic psalm, in which every other verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This shows the intentionality of the writer when exploring the seeming injustice of watching the wicked prosper. Walter Brueggemann notes, “This is the most obviously sapiential of all the psalms. Indeed it is a collection of sayings that might easily be found in the book of Proverbs. It appears to be a rather random collection of sayings without any order or development. However, there is an important qualification to that statement, for this psalm is acrostic and so is crafted with pedagogical purpose. That carefully ordered arrangement corresponds to the claim made for the substance of the psalm; that is, the world is exceedingly well ordered, and virtue is indeed rewarded” (Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984], 42).
4. At different times in life, we will all be asked to choke down the “just trust God” pill. It is not easy, and struggling to trust and remain faithful when our world is a dumpster fire is not a barometer of our spiritual wellness. Struggle or suffering do not mean that you do not love God or have unrepentant sin. It means that real life is hard. There are times when God seems absent. Ben Smithimedhin touches on how that affected the music of two hard-core Christian metal bands: “Underoath and Emery both reveal what doubt, addiction, and perhaps even abandonment could feel like. But their differences bring us to our choice: will we believe the lie that we can rid ourselves of Him, that we can be annihilated and start afresh? Will we remain obedient, like the saints before us, even when He seems absent? ... Rather than letting us be, our Lord is a God who haunts us into submission, a God who won’t leave us alone, a God whose words will never be erased” (Ben Smithimedhin, “Erase Me, but Your Words Won’t Be Erased: Underoath, Emery, and the God Who Won’t Leave Us Alone,” *Christ and Pop Culture*, December 7, 2018, <https://christandpopculture.com/erase-me-but-your-words-wont-be-erased-underoath-emery-and-the-god-who-wont-leave-us-alone/>).
5. In her book *Everything Happens for a Reason—And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, Kate Bowler chronicles her cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatment in light of researching the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel basically says that if you live rightly, God will give you good things. This is obviously not true. God does not dole out punishment and blessings on the believer based on how they behave. While there are natural consequences that happen—for better or worse—that are dependent on our choices, Jesus has paid for our sin, and we no longer need to be condemned by it. We can try to control things all we’d like, but in the end, there are many things that are completely out of our control. Bowler writes, “Control is a drug, and we are all hooked, whether or not we believe in the prosperity gospel’s assurance that we can master the future with our words and attitudes. I can barely admit to myself that I have almost no choice but to

surrender, but neither can those around me” (Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason—And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, [New York: Random House, 2018], 84). There are so many ways we grasp for control when the reality is that miniscule circumstance, like the mutations of microscopic cells in our body, can change the course of our lives. While surrendering our control is not often our go-to solution it is the one that God asks of us time and time again.

6. C. S. Lewis wrote in *Till We Have Faces*, “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?” (C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* [New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2012], 219). We will have unanswered questions. Could God ever give us an answer that would make it seem okay? Life on this earth will leave no one unscathed from pain, suffering, and death. Christ incarnate showed us a way through pain and heartbreak to a love that overcomes all things. Can we offer up our questions and take the time to be sad while still accepting our hearts will break, but that heartbreak can be part of the pathway to being more like Jesus?

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