
Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version of the Bible.

Ministry, Preaching, and Second Corinthians

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Monday

Ministry – Our Landscape

- Many ministers feel tremendous pressure to make something happen even as some signs in the church may not be encouraging. Very often they feel as if they are being singled out as the problem or the one who ought to be able to provide the fix.
- Many ministers are deeply concerned because their ministries seem largely ineffective and they are not sure what to do.
- Ministers often feel isolated, alone, and uncertain.
- Ministers may experience a confused identity as they work in a culture and a church sub-culture that often diminishes their value and work.

- Ministry is more difficult and complex than ever.
- Many ministers are doing everything they know to do with the tools they have and are feeling less and less effective.
- Ministers sometimes experience a heightened self-consciousness. For a number of years, I would come to events like this one or other lectureship seminars and feel “less than.” In fact I lived with a great deal of self-consciousness. In my more honest moments, I would admit that there seemed to be some ministers at these events who were important. I wondered, “How does this happen? How does a person become important?” Reading 2 Corinthians has a way of putting much of this into perspective.

What every minister in here knows is this: Ministry is messy! It doesn't matter what your church context is. It is messy!

Getting at Paul's theology in 2 Corinthians presents a special challenge because his theological reflections are so closely intertwined with highly personal matters related to his ministry with the church. To some extent, this is the case in every Pauline letter, since his theological beliefs, practices, and behaviors are so deeply rooted in who he is and what he does as an apostle. In one sense, two conversations are going on simultaneously in 2 Corinthians: a conversation with the church about everyday matters – travel plans, daily pressures, congregational crises, battles with other ministers, working with associates, raising money – and a conversation with and about God. The second conversation so thoroughly informs the first that trying to extract Paul's “theology” from his rich textual conversation with the Corinthians does an injustice to both the theology in the letter and the theology of the letter. (Holladay, 317)

The Approach

Paul's second letter to Corinth is very different from the first one. Something terrible had happened, and we feel his pain from the very opening lines. In this letter he goes down deeper into sorrow and hurt, and what to do about it, than he does anywhere else, and he emerges with a deeper, clearer vision of what it meant that Jesus himself suffered for and with us and rose again in triumph. The letter itself comes through the tragedy and out into the sunlight, and has a lot to teach us as we make that journey from time to time ourselves. So here it is: Paul for everyone – 2 Corinthians! (Wright, x)

1. The focus is on 2 Corinthians 1 – 6:10. Couched within this section is 2:14 – 6:10, which is often referred to as Paul's defense of his ministry.

This is a book flavored by Paul's deep sorrow and his personal suffering. Something has happened that has impacted the way he writes and his relationship with these Christians (Wright, 2). Something has changed between the writing of the first letter and the writing of the second letter (maybe a couple of years).

2. Authentic Ministry

Carl R. Holladay divides 2 Corinthians 2:14 through 6:10 into the following sections.

Ministerial Sincerity (2 Cor 2:14-17) ...

Ministerial Credentials: Moses And Christ, Old And New Covenant (2 Cor 3:1-18) ...

Ministerial Methods (2 Cor 4:1-6) ...

Ministry Shaped By Christ: Living The Gospel (2 Cor 4:7-15) ...

The Gospel Shapes The Present And Future (2 Cor 4:16-5:10) ...

Motives For Mission: Christ's Compelling Love, New Creation, And The Ministry Of Reconciliation (2 Cor 5:11-6:10). (Holladay, "Authentic," 164-170)

Tom Wright notes the following about Paul's theme.

*Paul's theme throughout this letter is the strange royal comfort that comes through the suffering and death, and the new **resurrection-life**, of Israel's **Messiah**, Jesus, the Lord of the world. (Wright, 2)*

3. The Ministry Situation at Corinth

- a. Paul's character and his entire role as an apostle and a minister of Jesus are impugned (10:10, 13:3) (Savage, 3).
- b. Evidently a number of people there have become dissatisfied with Paul. Some of the reasons include:
 - His refusal to boast. He refused to boast as his opponents boasted (11:18-21). When he does boast, he says it is because the Corinthians have practically forced him to do so. He speaks of his authentic life and work in the Lord. (Savage, 12)
 - His unimpressive physical presence. The Corinthians believe that Paul's letters are impressive but his bodily presence is lacking (10:10).
 - His inadequate speech. They are dissatisfied with his speech. In their view, it is contemptible (10:10) and lacking in skill (11:6).
 - His refusal to accept money from them. They do not approve of his refusal to accept monetary support (11:7-10, 12:14). They may be questioning the collection for the Jerusalem Christians wondering if this is a fraud. (Johnson, "Apostle Paul")

c. Paul is disturbed that his converts did not rally to support him when he was under attack (2:3-4, 7:12). They are also wondering if he is not in this for his own profit.

4. Why preach/teach 2 Corinthians?

- Hearing these words afresh provides the church with a rich opportunity for “self examination” (13:15).
- This book provides the church with the opportunity to think through the essence of authentic ministry.
- It provides the church the opportunity to address issues of authenticity instead of just resorting to cynicism.
- It addresses what the church might already be thinking regarding issues of integrity. It is important to act with integrity and to let others know we have acted with integrity (1:13-14, 13:6) (Thompson, *The Mark*, 13).
- This material addresses the values we place on ministers and our ministries. Do we look for a minister much like we would look for any other kind of leader? Do our expectations of our ministers mirror the values of this world or the values of the kingdom?
- The book opens a window into the life of an authentic minister.
- This book provides a big picture perspective for those who minister.
- This book gives both the minister and the church the opportunity to consider the essence of ministry regardless of the context in which they are ministering.
- This book is important for grasping Christian ministry.

No student of the New Testament who wishes to come to grips with the nature of the Christian ministry can afford to neglect the second epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians. (Savage, 1)

5. What is the value of this book today?

Carl R. Holladay makes a number of observations about the value of 2 Corinthians today (Holladay, “Authentic,” 164-170).

- a. The message of 2 Corinthians gives us the opportunity to speak regarding the nature of authentic ministry.

- b. What authenticates ministry is the way God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are present in the ministry/church. This powerful ministry happens because he is writing on our hearts.
- c. We are a part of something great. In fact, we have a high calling (2:14). We have this calling because this is God's ministry, initiated by God and empowered by God.
- d. Gospel ministry might begin with one's own life, living in the gospel. Carl R. Holladay notes: "Paul lives from the gospel by living within the gospel" (167).

As the vicarious death of Jesus benefits the minister who replicates the Christ event by living the gospel, so this cycle of "death giving way to life" within the minister gives life to the church. By living out of the gospel, the minister experiences life. By seeing the creative power of the gospel exemplified in the minister's life, the church itself learns to appropriate and experience new life. (167)

- e. Transcendent life as passed through the minister's own life cannot be "self-generated" (167). We are compared to "clay jars" (4:8-9). We are not capable or competent of ministry within ourselves. Note what Paul says (4:7) regarding the treasure and clay jars: to show the all-surpassing power of God.
- f. God is the prime actor in ministry. "Through it all, God is the prime actor: 'all this is from God' (5:18). . . . The initiative is fully God's, yet God has embraced ministers as coworkers" (170).
- g. The spiritual transformation of a church takes time. We may like the idea of the Christlike life and yet not live one. In 3:18, Paul teaches that Christians, beholding the beauty of the Lord, are being transformed into his image.

6. Timeline (Thompson, "2 Corinthians," 937)

- a. Paul established the church in 49 CE (Acts 18:1-18) and remained with Corinth for 18 months.
- b. After Paul left Corinth, he wrote a letter admonishing these Christians not to associate with those practicing sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:9).
- c. While at Ephesus, he wrote 1 Corinthians about 54 CE in response to reports from visitors (1 Cor. 1:11, 16:15) and a letter from the Corinthians. Timothy delivered the letter (1 Cor. 4:17) and then returned to Paul to report of a new situation.
- d. Evidently Paul then made a painful visit (2:1) in which someone instigated a rebellion against him (2:5, 7:12). He then returned to Ephesus and wrote a different letter (2:4). Titus delivered this letter and then brought back to Paul a favorable report of the situation (2:6, 7:8-12).

e. Yet, some of these very serious issues remain. Some of these people are saying that Paul himself and his ministry are lacking (3:1-5, 10:12).

With the church caught between the two competing claims to authentic ministry, this letter is primarily a defense speech in which he responds to the charges against him by redefining the nature of Christian ministry. (Thompson, "2 Corinthians," 937)

7. What Paul Exhibits as a Christian Minister

In our ministries today, we look first to Jesus as our model for ministry. We might then look to his closest followers for an example of the content and manner of ministry. The following are some characteristics of Paul's ministry in which he "has been entrusted by God with the care of his children"(Harris, 120).

Murray J. Harris writes:

a. Adaptability

As Paul sought to get his "children" to open their hearts wide to him (6:13) and to close their hearts against his adversaries, he used a delicate blend of meekness (10:1; 13:10) and boldness (10:2, 11; 11:13). Because the immature Corinthians were dazzled by the pompous boasting of the Judaizers about their credentials and achievements, he was forced to indulge in boasting as they did (10:8; 11:1, 16-18, 21-27; 12:1, 11), although he chose to boast in matters that showed his weakness (11:30), namely his humiliating nocturnal escape from Damascus (11:31-33) and his debilitating "thorn in the flesh" (12:7).

...

b. Jealousy

Paul was jealous for the Corinthians' undivided loyalty to Christ during the period between their betrothal to Christ (= their conversion) and their presentation to Christ, their heavenly bridegroom (= their glorification; 11:2-3). Paul pictures himself as the father of the bride, whose aim was to preserve her virginity, her "sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (11:3), until her marriage.

...

c. Devotion

Indicative of Paul's paternal devotion to his children was the "daily pressure" of his anxious concern for all his churches (11:28) as he sympathized with their weakness in faith, conduct, and conscience (11:29; cf. 1 Cor. 8:7-13; 9:22; 12:26).

...

d. *Affection*

Like parents who work hard and save up for their children (12:14), Paul was willing “to spend and be spent” for the benefit of his spiritual children (12:15).

...

e. *Fear*

As he contemplated his forthcoming third visit (12:14), Paul was fearful that the visit might lead to mutual embarrassment (12:20), that sin might continue to be rampant in the church (12:20), and that he might again be humiliated and grieved because of certain unrepentant Corinthians (12:21). These fears induced Paul to issue a warning of impending discipline (13:1-4) and a plea for self-examination (13:5-10). (Harris, 120-121)

Tuesday

... seeks to understand the apostle Paul's apparently contradictory description of his ministry in 2 Corinthians as one in which power is manifested through weakness: 'When I am weak, then I am strong!' This paradox becomes intelligible when it is understood that Paul's critics were influenced by a perspective which was the exact opposite of his: they imbibed the self-exalting outlook of their contemporary world, while he embraced the self-emptying gospel of Christ. Drawing from archaeological data on first-century Corinth, this study is unique in establishing both the secular underpinnings of Paul's paradoxical language and the devastating critique which that language offers on the general outlook of the first century. Paul emerges as a radical foil to the spirit of the age. (Savage, inside cover)

How I Prepared to Preach this Book

The objective in preaching this material was to move our church toward focusing on the nature of ministry in the New Testament. Consequently, part of the preparation was to reflect on my own ministry context in Waco in particular then on my ministry in general.

1. I planned this series in the spring then started actual preparation in July 2009 (two weeks). Finally, I began preaching the sermon series in September. (Compare crock pot to microwave preparation.)
2. I read 2 Corinthians many, many times in a variety of English translations.
3. General observations regarding 2 Corinthians literature:

- American Theological Library Association (ATLA) (2010) (<http://search.ebscohost.com>):

Student, staff person, or faculty member access: Please check your library website or call your librarian to find out whether you qualify for access through your institution.

Onsite visitor access to local college or university library: You can also check to see whether your local college or university library has institutional online subscriptions to ATLAS (as well as the ATLA Religion Database). If so, you may be able to access these databases as a guest user whilst physically visiting their on-campus library. Please call the library ahead to confirm their on-campus guest user policy before you visit.

Alumni access: We also wanted to remind you that many academic institutions now offer free ATLAS subscriptions for their alumni/ae. The number of sites has tripled in the past year. Please periodically check this website to see if your alma mater offers ATLAS for ALUM subscriptions: <http://www.atla.com/products/catalogs/atlasalum.htm>.

Clergy and Church Administrative Staff Site Access (NEW!): ATLA has partnered with EBSCO Publishing to now offer ATLAS on their enhanced EBSCOhost platform at a special rate of \$100 per year (normally priced at \$150 per year). Because you are an existing subscriber through ATLA, EBSCO and ATLA are offering a special promotion if you are clergy or from a church or congregation of worship's administrative staff. You must transfer your subscription by March 31, 2010 to EBSCO. In the meantime, access through ATLA will not be suspended until March 31. EBSCO will handle all orders, licenses, and related issues. IMPORTANT: YOU MUST SEND e-mail clergy@ebscohost.com. If you are an alumni of certain institutions you may be able to subscribe for free: <http://www.atla.com/products/catalogs/atlasalum.htm>.

- Searching through bibliographies in the back of 2 Corinthians commentaries.
- Notes written to various scholars/ministers asking for resources.
- Searched several journals looking for entire issues devoted to 2 Corinthians (e.g., *Leaven*, vol. 10, no. 4, Fourth Quarter 2002, edited by D'Esta Love and Stuart Love).
- Prayed regularly for my own understanding and obedience as I read the book.
- Reflected on my life and ministry as I read the book.
- Taught through the material on Wednesday evenings and worked through this in my daily devotional readings.

A Preaching Challenge

This book can be difficult and challenging. Two issues are present here.

1. Some ministers live week-to-week in their preaching. As a result, they have the constant anxiety of preparing a different sermon each week, not beginning until the Monday before. This “microwave” preaching is very difficult in the long run for both the minister and the church.
2. “Crock pot” preaching is when you give a sermon the time to cook slowly. I planned this series in this way, working on this in June/July then preaching through this beginning in September. This allows time for the words/thoughts of the message to sink in.

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You Can Rely on God
The Treasure of God’s Ministry #1
2 Corinthians 1
 September 20, 2009

Focus Statement: Christian ministry is hard and even painful, but God is faithful through it all.

Function: To reassure through difficult times that we can rely on God and that he is faithful.

Introduction

She said it one day in a moment of frustration. Life was not going very well for her on a number of fronts. Marriage. Children. Job. Anyway, she said, “I thought that if I tried to do what was right, life would go well.”

Some of us believe this about our life in the congregation. “I just thought if I tried to do the right thing, life in the church would go smoothly.”

Sometimes we are just not sure what normal as a Christ-follower is supposed to be like.

Sometimes we are just not sure what a church is really supposed to be like.

Sometimes we are just not sure whether we are making a difference or not.

What we *can* be sure about is that we can rely on God!

Over the next number of months, we will spend a lot of time in 2 Corinthians. Why? Several reasons.

- **It gives a picture of what authentic ministry in a church looks like.**
- **It helps us get a Jesus-centered perspective as we think about our future and ministry.** Sometimes ministry can seem like little more than religious work. You can have a respectable ministry in the eyes of some and hardly give a polite nod toward Jesus. (Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, pp. 1-3)
- **It gives us a picture of what we might expect in the life of a church.** (We would do well to think about what Paul went through in his ministry.)

For a few weeks, I want us to think about what it means to rely on God in our ministry and in our church. This is critical. Then later, we will look at the nature of ministry as revealed in 2 Corinthians.

1. You may not think this is a *treasure*.

In this book Paul defends himself and his ministry against some in the church. They accuse him of not being legitimate, and he defends himself. In this text Paul also lays out what it means to be about one's ministry with the church.

The following is what Paul is experiencing in his ministry:

- Suffering 1:5-6
- Distress 1:6
- Hardships 1:8
- Under great pressure 1:8
- Despaired of life 1:8
- Felt the sentence of death 1:9
- Deadly peril 1:10

There are two lists of Paul's sufferings in this book (6:4-10, 11:23-29). Note that it is in the context of some very intense trouble that Paul says, "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (11:28).

Now this is not a lot of fun. We ought to say to every minister and even every shepherd that if you stay in this long enough, this is what you may experience. This means that this minister may not really experience many good times in his work. In fact, it would be hard to say that he is really advancing his career goals. Why would anyone stay with such a church?

If you are a minister of a church, this may be when you may decide that you need to leave. If you are a member of this church, this is when you say, "We are going to look around."

This is not fun. Yet it is the reality of our ministry.

2. You may not be attracted to a ministry that often comes out of weakness.

What kind of ministry did Paul have? This does not exactly fit the image of Paul that many of us have. Many of us look at Paul as if he had no weaknesses or struggles. Yet, that is not the way he describes himself in chapter 1.

He says that he experienced all of these emotions and that God was there for him. This is a painful, personal, and profound description of what was happening in his life.

Yet it is out of this weakness that Paul ministers. Far too often we attempt to minister out of strength and then hide our weaknesses. What happens when we do this? We rely on ourselves. When we rely on ourselves, our ministry as individuals or as a church will always be very limited. Later, Paul will quote Jesus as saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (12:9).

3. Yet, the treasure of ministry is found in God as we learn to rely on him.

- a. God comforts us in all our troubles and allows us the opportunity to treasure his character (1:3-4).** (Think of how faithful God is. You can rely on God.)
- b. God gives us the opportunity to share in Christ's sufferings (1:5).** (When you suffer for being a Christ-follower, you have the opportunity to share in Christ's sufferings.)
- c. God's comfort overflows so that we can minister to others (1:5-7).** He also brings a new capacity to minister. The comfort of Christ overflows. "If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer" (1:6).
- d. God continues to deliver us in ministry even as others pray for us (1:10-11).** All of this is because we have set our hope on him that he will continue to deliver us. They participate in this ministry with Paul by praying.

Conclusion – The Pain of Ministry

- You see families torn and children hurt.
- You see young people discard their faith in Christ and live lives of disobedience.
- You see men/women experience the pain of life due to disease, crime, and other forms of human brokenness.
- Our city – 60 recently in family abuse – our own city. Not all children and families are safe.

- Twenty-seven million people involved in human trafficking – 80% women, 50% children. Between 14,500 and 17,400 are trafficked into the United States each year. [Illus. – Yesterday. Houston is considered a hub for traffickers. Girls from overseas brought to U. S. and then sent throughout the country to be used.]
- You see people going to their graves without Christ.

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The One Who Makes the Difference
The Treasure of God's Ministry #2
2 Corinthians 1:12ff
 September 27, 2009

Focus Statement: God is faithful and reliable in his character and in his dealing with human beings.

Function: To create faithfulness and reliability in the way we conduct ourselves in ministry.

Introduction

What a surprise! This week the FBI arrested a 19-year-old man, a Jordanian immigrant, for attempting to blow up a 60-story downtown Dallas skyscraper. A serious attempt was made to blow up the Fountain Place building on Field at Ross Avenue.

According to news reports, the suspect had talked online for more than six months about wanting to blow up a building.

We have learned to be a skeptical, and even a cynical, people. We have been disappointed too much. Time and again, we have found out that *people are not always what they seem to be*.

We watch politicians – scandals in both political parties. National. State. Local. *People are not always what they seem to be*.

We watch celebrities. We read of arrests, domestic violence, drugs, etc. We see one person on television and then find out the rest of the story. *People are not always what they seem to be*.

Sometimes we work for companies and we are not sure they are being entirely truthful. Or, you are managing a company and you sink thousands of dollars into training employees

and then you learn they have not been entirely truthful. *People are not always what they seem to be.*

Yet, sometimes we learn there is another side to the story. Sometimes we learn that what we thought was a credibility issue isn't really that. The Corinthian Christians were miffed at Paul. He had told them that he would come for a second visit. He planned to come to Corinth on his way to Macedonia and then make another trip back to Corinth on his way back from Macedonia.

Now his plans have changed. Evidently some are accusing Paul of being unreliable and not truthful, that he is just like everyone else – says one thing but does another. This seemed to some like a breach in his honor and integrity. It may have seemed that Paul was not grateful for their hospitality.

Not so Paul says, and he explains why he changed his itinerary. He believed it was actually in their best interest that he not visit. Yet, they are questioning not only his integrity but also his apostleship. This is important because he has just said that his apostleship was tied to the “will of God” (1:1).

Right in the middle of such talk, Paul reveals some powerful characteristics of his own ministry.

1. Ministry is expressed through personal integrity (1:12-17).

This is our “boast.” Sounds odd to our ears. Certainly, Paul would not have been supportive of what we commonly think of as bragging. He was not trying to flash his credentials. Yet, in that day some ancient writers praised themselves in a discrete manner. Plutarch (the historian, biographer, etc.), for example, wrote “How to Praise Oneself Inoffensively.” Yet, Paul's boast is in the church.

His behavior, life, and words can be characterized by the word “integrity.” This is what his opponents are questioning. They are questioning his integrity as he relates to these people. He served with a clear conscience. He is hiding nothing. No hidden agenda. No ulterior or sinister motives. No, he has a clear conscience in this because he knows how he has conducted himself in both the world in general and with them as believers.

He behaved with the holiness and sincerity that come from God. You've known people like this haven't you? What they say and what they do really does reflect the nature of God (Psalm 78:70-72).

He is not following the ways of the world. He is not intending, for instance, to be obscure in his writing so that he can appeal to all. He is sincere and only wants to be frank. He wants them to read and understand his writings.

He wants them to be able to boast or take pride in him just as he takes pride in them.

2. Ministry is based on the faithfulness of God (1:18-22).

Some of us get our “ways” from our mothers and dads. That is, someone might say, “Yes, you really can’t trust her/him. He is very much like his dad. She is very much like her parents.”

Paul is saying that you can look at his ministry and see that it is based on who God is. This is important because evidently some are questioning the word that he preached.

- **God is faithful. He doesn’t say “yes” one minute and then “no” the next.**
- **Jesus, the Son of God, as proclaimed, is the result of God’s faithfulness.**
- **The Holy Spirit is God’s seal of ownership on us and a deposit guaranteeing what is to come.** He has placed his “seal of ownership on us and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (1:22).
 - a. The Spirit is active in the life of the church. The Spirit confirms the validity of God’s relationship to his people. In this reference, “confirm” means “the legal guarantee that a seller gives a buyer to ensure the validity of the sale against any possible third-party claims” (Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, p. 67).
 - b. He “anointed us” – as in the Old Testament when the Spirit equips and empowers (Isaiah 11:1).
 - c. He has put his seal, his mark of ownership, on us. The relationship has not been tampered with.
 - d. He *is* the deposit – the first taste of the life to come.

Our ministry is grounded on the very nature of the Trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are in relationship with one another, and they very much impact the way we relate to one another as a church.

It should be noted, finally, that this is one of the most God-centered, God-focused paragraphs in the Pauline corpus. As such, it is a clear reflection of Paul’s essential theology, and is even more telling because it is such an “off-the-cuff,” nonreflective moment. Paul’s integrity – and their own existence in Christ that is so integrally tied up with that integrity – ultimately rests in the character of God (his trustworthiness, whose promises have all been realized in Christ) and in the saving activity of God, which is but an outflow of His character.

Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, p. 289

Paul is saying, “You can count on me.” He is acting with integrity. His integrity comes from God.

3. Ministry should reflect a genuine affection for people (2:1-2).

This is not something that can be manufactured or contrived. He loves these people and this love has been generated from God himself, who is the foundation for what he does.

4. Moving Ahead as Christ-Followers

- **We are called to be persons of integrity.** Ministry rises and falls on personal integrity. If a person has integrity, then there is a sense that he/she is a “whole” person and is acting with all sincerity. However, if integrity is lacking, such a life can betray the message of Jesus.

- **Our integrity is based on the character and saving activity of God.** Integrity is more than trying to be ethical or trying to be good. Our integrity is based on the very nature of God.

Our ministry is not based on what works (pragmatism) or what the “consumers” want. Our ministry is based on what God has done in Christ. The best thing we can do – both for our ministry in the present and in the future – is to read Jesus.

Conclusion

Who is the one who makes the difference in our ministry? God. Yes, you are called to be available. Yes, you are called to minister. But it is God who makes the difference.

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Now Is Not the Time for Discouragement
The Treasure of God’s Ministry #3
2 Corinthians 2:12-16
 October 4, 2009

Focus Statement: God is in front and is at work leading his people in triumphant procession.

Function: To create confidence in God that he is at work in his church in significant ways.

Introduction

One of the big news stories this week was the selection of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as the site for the 2016 Olympics. This represents a wonderful opportunity for our South American neighbor, which will be hosting the Olympics for the very first time.

For Rio and Brazil, this represented much hard work and persistence. They have come close three other times but fell short. They wanted to host the 1936 Olympics but fell short. They put in their bid to host the 2004 Olympics but fell short. Again, they put in their bid to host the 2012 Olympics but fell short. The president of Brazil said on Friday, "Our hour has arrived. It has arrived."

Sometimes we feel discouraged. Things just haven't turned out the way we had hoped.

1. Have you noticed that ministry is not the same?

We want our ministries to be successful. We would like to know that what we do in our personal ministry will be successful. We would like to know that whatever we do as a church would be successful.

a. There was a time when it seemed that whatever was done in the church of Christ seemed triumphant.

- Formation of Christian schools, camps, etc.
- People would often come for whatever special events the church put on.
- Gospel meetings. People just needed to know the right response.

In the minds of many people, it all boiled down to getting them to be a part of the right group or the right congregation. We could point to new buildings, a large contribution, and large numbers of people.

b. Now we live in a very different culture.

It may not look like we are winning. Think about the church at Corinth. Paul has already written a letter dealing with all kinds of issues in their lives: a man living with his father's wife, lawsuits among the Christians, sexual immorality, a real arrogance among some Christians, etc. He made a painful visit to deal with someone in rebellion who has caused him a lot of grief (2:5). Later he writes another letter that he describes as having been written with "many tears" and "out of affliction and anguish of heart" (2:4). Now Paul has left Troas where he had hoped to meet Titus to hear a report on the condition of the Corinthian church. He left Troas where "the Lord had opened a door for me" (2:12) to deal with them.

In the meantime, there must have been some people who had become discouraged. I know I can relate to this. There have been times when I have become very discouraged. Sometimes this has to do with our expectations.

2. What can you expect when you participate in the ministry of Jesus (2:14-16)?

a. God leads his people in triumphant procession.

Paul (2:14) pictures a victorious general leading a procession after a great victory. The Roman general leads the procession into the great Roman theater. Prisoners were led as captives and as public displays of the victory. They would often release incense into the air upon coming home from victory. Some believe that this, in part, was to cover the stench of death after they killed them. Paul is saying that he (or the church) is the one spreading the fragrance, confronting people with the knowledge of God and causing them to make decisions concerning Jesus.

Note this is God leading the victory. Not Paul. Paul is not leading the triumphal procession; rather, he is one who has been captured. Yet, there is great triumph in this. We too have been taken captive by Christ (1 Cor. 4:9). The idea is that we are servants.

He then says that we are the “aroma of Christ.” We are the aroma of Christ to God. The fragrance of the knowledge of him is spreading everywhere. Note that this is a knowledge of Jesus that is being preached and is now being spread everywhere (1:19).

b. There are two possible responses to this ministry.

- **Some will see this as a great victory.**
- **Some will see this as ultimate defeat.**

Now this language is not overly dramatic. He is not using these words to shock. Life and death are literally at stake!

This is strange talk from Paul. After all, he has just had to defend himself to these people. They have accused him of being insincere and fickle. In 2:1-13, he recalls the grief that accompanied his ministry to the Corinthians. He has written them “out of much affliction and with many tears” (2:4). It is amazing that at this point he says that there is victory. When is a church victorious? When is a church triumphant? What would that look like? How do we know if things are going well? God’s ministry is a ministry of the cross. It is a ministry of the crucified Christ. We proclaim good news, which is a wonderful aroma. But, we also preach the demands of the cross, which may be the smell of death to those who are not being saved.

Paul is saying that the power of God is at work even when things do not seem victorious. The power of God can work in the normal, mundane tasks that we do. You may never see the final results of some of your ministry.

3. What characterizes the ministry of Jesus (2:17)?

Because our concern is not with what we can see but with the unseen (4:18), our successes are not easy to measure. Consequently, we demand some kind of tangible evidence that our work has made a difference. What do we point to? The building? Attendance? Contribution? Yet, there is more to ministry than these visible signs. We may wonder at times, “Does my work count for anything?”

Paul wants these people to know that they are to have a different mindset. For example, he says there are three characteristics of our ministry.

- **We are not self-serving.** First, we are not in this for the money. We are not “peddlers” of God’s word, focused on how much money we can make. He models this before the church wanting them to know that his ministry is not about being self-serving.
- **We speak with sincerity.** There is no hidden agenda; rather he speaks before God with sincerity.
- **We are on a mission from God.** A final characteristic is that he understands that he has been sent from God. This is about God and his mission.

4. What are the implications for us?

a. Individually – This means that some of the most significant ways you will be involved in serving the Lord will not be obvious. In fact, you may not think that what you are doing is all that significant. You are the aroma of Christ. You smell good. When people are around you, they come away having smelled a scent. It is Jesus Christ. What does this mean practically?

We look to the things that are unseen. This suggests that some of the most important things you will do for God will be things that cannot be seen. Reading a Bible story to your children at night. Teaching a class of 4- and 5-year-olds at church. Putting in a good word for God when you have the opportunity. [Illus. – J. Carson who went to Buddy and Wanda’s home every Thursday to wash their van and mow their yard. Buddy was in a wheelchair] [Illus. – M. Sloan and her work in a nursing home]

Yet, it is about more than this. It is about going to work every day believing that you are wearing a fragrance that some people are going to find compelling. Others will not be interested. Expect this!

b. As a Congregation – The other night we experienced an important moment as a church. There was great media coverage. There was great television, newspaper, and *Facebook* coverage. Yet, let us catch the significance of this moment. Yes, it was brought about by one of our families in a health crisis. But what happened was much more than this.

One of the important principles of living on a mission field is that we are a people who receive well (Luke 10:2ff). We go into a house and eat and drink what is set before us. One of the most important things we can do in our community is to receive very well. We receive graciously. Ministry is not just about doing something for someone else. Rather, it can be about inviting others to join us in giving. One of the best ways we can serve this community is to assume that our community has something to offer, something to give, and that they can join us in serving someone else.

Conclusion

We are a triumphant church. We are a victorious church. It is not because of what might be attractive to some. It is because the ministry of Jesus is being carried out through us.

- Young couples who invite their neighbors to their small group Bible study.
- The businessperson who in the corporate boardroom understands that there are greater issues at stake than the “bottom line.” He marches in the victory procession.
- The group of mothers who meet weekly for coffee and then pray for their children. They are in that victory procession.
- The high school student who lets it be known that not only does he go to church but he also is a follower of Jesus even to the point of standing up for what he believes in. He marches in that victory procession.
- That group of high school teachers who meet early in the morning each week to pray for their students. They march in the victory processional.

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The Secret to Confident Living
The Treasure of God’s Ministry #4
2 Corinthians 2:16 – 3:6
 October 18, 2009

Focus Statement: Paul’s confidence and competence for ministry is rooted in the Holy Spirit’s work.

Function: To give hearers confidence in what God wishes to do through them in everyday ministry.

Introduction

Some people seem to be confident – but for all the wrong reasons.

Some people seem to be confident, but it feels obnoxious to others. There is a quiet confidence, however, that doesn't repel but is actually very attractive to others. This confidence is rooted in God.

1. The Letter that Really Counts (3:1-3)

What is the result of ministry?

- **Changed Lives – the product of the Holy Spirit's work**

How does the Holy Spirit bless God's people?

- **Power – a people who possess the life of God**

a. Resumes can be interesting, especially if you know the person. I once saw a resume of a person who claimed to have much formal education. In fact, he claimed to have a Ph. D. in Bible from a university with which I was familiar. Evidently, this person thought this advanced degree would help him secure a teaching job. Or, he may have even thought it would help him secure a ministry with some churches. I was familiar with this university not because of its campus or its professors. Rather, I was familiar with it because I had heard the story of its beginning.

Let me say more about this university. What was interesting is that the university had no campus. It had no full-time students. It had no library. The university was located in a file cabinet. The university was actually founded in the back of a car when two men had an idea regarding how they could quickly have advanced degrees behind their names. Not too impressive.

b. In Paul's day, there was no e-mailing a video resume or even a text. No, people often carried with them letters that introduced them and their business concern. N. T. Wright notes that in the *Didache* people had these letters of recommendation as a way of verifying that those who claimed to be servants of Jesus were, in fact, genuine (N. T. Wright, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 26-27).

Paul was being accused of carrying letters that *he* had actually written. Basically, they were accusing him of fraud.

Evidently these people have come into Corinth saying that Paul is incompetent. They are saying that Paul does not know what he is talking about. Meanwhile, they come with letters of recommendation. The more credible the person who signed the letter, the more competent and credible the minister is supposed to be. Isn't that where competence comes from? Do we put our confidence in ourselves?

Every week, NBC is investing millions of dollars betting that Steve Carell's portrayal of Michael Scott trying to appear confident will resonate with viewers. Do we look that silly to God when we try to handle life on our own?

Paul says that the most important letter we have is not on parchment but is what has happened to people because of Christ.

c. In Christ you sin and you *don't* die. What?

Something is not quite right here. You sin and you don't die!?!]

Consequently, Paul can say that the Spirit gives life. Paul begins this book by saying that it is God who makes all of us stand firm in Christ (1:20-22). He put his seal of ownership on us and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come.

Only when the Spirit is at work can *real* life in Christ be experienced.

We don't experience Christ by being the busy church. We don't experience Christ by being the perfect church. We don't experience Christ by being the tightrope church. [Illus. – guy had one foot on a hot stove and one foot on a block of ice. Then he said, "Well, at least on average, things are just right."]

We experience real life when the Spirit is at work in us empowering us in spite of our brokenness.

2. The Source of Lasting Confidence (3:4-6)

a. Business people talk about the bottom line. They talk about what really counts. Paul says that what really counts are not letters of recommendation but the lives that have been changed in Jesus Christ.

Paul says that what counts is not the letter that he has in a briefcase. Rather, what counts are *the letters that are written on hearts*. Paul says that it was Jesus who wrote these letters. He did not write on tablets of stone but on tablets of the human heart. It is Jesus himself who changed and affected the hearts of men and women. He wrote the letter, and Paul was the mail carrier.

"Tablets of stone" (3:3) refers to the Mosaic Law. This law was written on tablets of stone. This law did provide for atonement. Both David and Paul reminded us that the law was good. However, now that Christ has come, the law serves to show us that we have failed before God. We fall short of his demands. You sin and you die. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Perhaps this is an echo of Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezra 11:19. This covenant written on stone had been unable to renew life. It pointed to God's demand but gave no power to

cause a person to want to obey. In Jesus there is not only a demand but also a power at work in our hearts. We are becoming. Before we talk about doing, we need to talk about becoming.

b. Perhaps we need to take another look at what really counts in ministry. The test of ministry is not press releases or statistics but changed lives.

3. What is the secret to confident living?

God's Spirit lives in us making us competent to walk daily with Jesus and carry out his ministry.

What does this mean? It means that when we have problems, we do not panic. If we are depending on our intelligence, our education, our experience, our expertise, or our money, we may become overly confident. We may have problems. We may have heartaches. We may have things that burden us. However, we do not have to panic.

[Illus. – Living in KC and witnessing a run on a bank. A few calls. The media. A line in front of the bank. Panic.]

We do not panic because God's Spirit dwells in us.

Conclusion

- This week, think about the ways you are sometimes fearful and insecure in your walk with Jesus and in your attempt to live as a Jesus person throughout the week.
- Think about five reasons why you think that putting confidence in God's work through his Spirit might be better than putting confidence in yourself.
- Begin the day by thanking God that he is more than enough to help you be what he wants you to be that day.

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Wednesday

Story of conversation with R. Biles regarding Jimmy Dorrell – I told Coach Biles one day that I had met Jimmy Dorrell, the director of Mission Waco. Jimmy had told me that the coach had at one time been in his youth group in earlier years. Anyway, I told Coach Biles that I knew Jimmy. He said, "Now I really like him. He is about street-level faith." Now I

like that! He refers to another believer as having faith that is street level. Isn't this what you are about as a minister in a church? You deal with life and God on street level.

What you are doing is a noble calling. This is not just a nice career. At street level you continue to get into situations that are over your head (marriage, credit card debt, story of foster children in Florence, etc.). You must rely on God for this ministry.

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You Are God's Masterpiece
The Treasure of God's Ministry #5
2 Corinthians 3:1-6
 October 25, 2009

Focus Statement: Paul wishes to communicate that Jesus, through the Spirit of God, is at work within believers, making his imprint on their hearts.

Function: Believing that God has created me to be a masterpiece will give me confidence every day.

Introduction

Conversation with "Carla" and the story of her move to Seattle – She said, describing her new church, "It is really different." She told me of a former prostitute who asked her to study the Bible with her. She said they opened a Bible to the Gospel of Luke. After reading one passage of Scripture, she said the young woman asked, "Do you mean that Jesus is God?"

Stories like this have a way of shaking us for a moment and clearing away the fog so that we can focus on our mission again. Maybe this is a reminder that we really are a letter that the Holy Spirit is writing.

1. Jesus, through the Spirit of God, is writing a masterpiece.

Think for a moment about tattoos. What are they? Ink underneath the skin. The tattoo artist works for a while and then leaves the customer with the picture or the image. He may make a mark on the skin, but it never goes beyond anything that is skin deep.

When Jesus lives in you, he works on you through God's Spirit. His work isn't limited to the skin. No, what he is writing is not on stone or flesh but on your heart.

He is creating a masterpiece. Think for a moment about some of the masterpieces in the Western world.

- *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*
- *Hamlet*
- *Gone with the Wind*
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- *The Lord of the Rings*
- *Winnie-the-Pooh*
- *The Black Stallion*
- *Charlotte's Web*
- *War and Peace*

So let us think about these two realities.

- **Jesus, through the Spirit of God, is at work.** This is not about you. This is not about me. Rather, *Jesus* is at work in you.

How? The Spirit of the living God has done something to your heart.

- CPA – who confronted his boss over illegal practices
- Coke driver – who was harassed by fellow workers

How has my life changed because of Jesus? How is it being changed now?

- **Jesus is writing a masterpiece: you.** In fact, this is something that will be read by all who have the opportunity. You won't find this at Barnes & Noble or on Amazon. You will find this masterpiece by looking in the mirror. Don't get distracted by your ears, skin, height or weight. I am not talking about self-esteem, either the lack of it or the importance of it. Rather, I am talking about you and me not minimizing what God is doing in our lives. You are God's masterpiece because it is God who is writing on your heart. This writing is his way of creating a new story.

2. What can others read?

The question is not just what are we *telling*. What are we *showing*? Our mission requires speaking and incarnation (Jesus living in me and in us) – that the church is about what we declare with our words and what we declare with our lives.

- **Let us be cautious about telling truth while we neglect doing truth.**
- **Our ministry is an incarnational ministry that displays God's masterpieces.** This means that we believe that Christ really does live in us individually and as a church.

3. Bottom Line

- **What makes a church is not a building but a mission.**
- **Our mission is expressed in both words (2:17) and transformed lives (3:1-3).** Do I talk about my favorite verses and the Lord but then am drunk on Saturday night?
- **Knowing that *God* is preparing a masterpiece gives us confidence.** Your ministry in this community is not about you. Your self-perception is not nearly as important as your perception of the masterpiece that God has created for you to be.

Conclusion

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Your Life *Can* Change
The Treasure of God's Ministry #6
2 Corinthians 3:7-18
 November 22, 2009

Focus Statement: New covenant ministry features the dynamic of the Holy Spirit as God's means to transform hearts.

Function: To encourage us to place our confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit for the ministry of transforming hearts.

Introduction

Have you known people who were hardheaded? Perhaps you have known some people like this. They always have to learn the hard way. While some people hear and learn, others seem to always live and learn. That is, they seem to only learn through trials and mistakes.

There are also people who are *hard-hearted*. Hard-hearted people (maybe we are in this number) have our ears open and eyes open but our hearts are closed to what God wishes to do in our lives.

We all make mistakes. However, at times, it is shocking to see people make a mistake and then act as if they do not care. I suspect they are letting us see their hard hearts.

Years ago, we were leaving the church building in Dallas where I grew up. We were walking on the bottom level of the classroom wing. Two boys in the 6th grade were walking toward the outside doors. They opened the doors and then let them go, letting them slam into the face of a young girl on crutches, a girl who had polio as a child. As the door closed behind these boys, one looked behind him and saw that this young girl was behind them. He made no apology nor did he hold the door open. At that point, his lack of concern was obvious: hard-heartedness.

1. The Dynamic that Brings Life (3:7-11)

Let us think back to the story of the giving of the law in the book of Exodus. Think especially of the part of the story where Moses leaves the presence of the Lord to speak with the people. He descends from the mountain with a shining or glowing face.

Now Paul is going to contrast these two covenants. Both of them have glory, though the glory of the new covenant far surpasses the glory of the older one. Think of glory as something that is captivating and attractive.

Think for a moment about the Sinai covenant or the “old” covenant.

- It was a ministry that brought death (3:7). The law points out right and wrong and makes us aware of our death due to our disobedience. That law is like a mirror that reveals just how sinful we really are.
- It was a ministry that condemns (3:9). The law reminds us that we are condemned through our disobedience.

This text is not about the old covenant being bad and the new covenant being good. Nor is it about a contrast between Moses and Paul. Rather, it is about the old covenant resulting in death and the new covenant, the covenant of the Spirit, resulting in life. Consequently, there is more of the glory of God to be seen in the new covenant than in the old. The Spirit of God not only gives us the very life of God but also enables us to catch a glimpse of God’s glory so that we can be transformed into his likeness.

He is the dynamic who, through Jesus, produces life in us. This is the Holy Spirit, the life-giving Spirit, at work. This life-giving Spirit can change you and make you who you never thought you could be. This new covenant ministry has more glory than the former covenant. Why? It has more glory because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit at work to make this incredible change.

Remember:

- **The Holy Spirit – the living dynamic of God’s presence – works in us to create internal change (3:1-3).** The extent of these internal changes can be seen and read by everyone (3:1-3).

- **The Spirit produces life in a person (3:6).** In other words, look at a church in which the people are experiencing the very life and power of God. This is evidence of the work of the Spirit of God. Life is eternal life, but it is also what you are experiencing right now. Note the fruit of the Spirit: evidence of life (Galatians 5:22ff).

2. The Dynamic that Changes People (3:12-18)

Hard-hearted people are a part of every generation of believers. This was true of the Israelites (3:14), it was true of Paul's critics (3:15), and it is true today.

These critics have made the charge that Paul is not bold but timid (10:1); however, he compares himself with Moses and declares that he is bold. This "confident openness" had special importance during this time. This is a word that had special meaning in the writings of Philo, which meant the fruit of wisdom and nobility. So, in other words, Paul was not hiding anything. He was completely authentic.

In this new covenant ministry, there is something powerful at work. The Holy Spirit is at work when we turn to the Lord Jesus (3:18). When Moses stood before God, his face reflected the glory of God and literally shone. When we turn to the Lord Jesus, we too begin to change. Like Moses, Christians have privileged access to God. We begin to be transformed. This is not a physical transformation in which we witness a change in the body. Rather, this transformation is even more profound. This is heart transformation that impacts one's attitude, priorities, disposition, behavior, etc.

The power behind such a transformation is the Holy Spirit, working through the presence of Jesus Christ. This transformation only gets stronger and stronger as we look at Jesus. It does not fade away.

What is it that removes the veil from our hearts? It is the Holy Spirit! When you gaze at the Lord, the Spirit goes to work on your heart. What is so powerful about our ministry? The ministry of the Spirit transforms us as the people of God into the very likeness of God with ever increasing measure.

- **What makes our ministry powerful is the work of the Holy Spirit transforming the hearts of people.** [Illus. – like electricity]

We often focus on many things. Procedures. Buildings. Dress. Pews. Comments. Meetings. Things. What God is concerned about in new covenant ministry is the heart.

Trying to minister without the presence and activity of the living, dynamic Holy Spirit is like trying to write this post on my computer without electricity. Don't get me wrong. I like my Mac. I like it very much. No problem there. Yet, sitting at this computer for hours with the electrical cord unplugged from the wall will never produce very much. Trying to write this post with no electricity will never be very effective regardless of my intentions or best effort. It is the electricity that is the dynamic that makes all of this possible. I can have the

best tools and make the best effort in my ministry, yet the Holy Spirit is the living dynamic that changes lives. He is the one, through Jesus, who really changes people.

- **What God wants to change, in new covenant ministry, is the heart** (1 Samuel 16:6-7).

Notice the difference here. Men and women notice what is on the outside but God looks on the heart. Think for a moment. Does God care what we are wearing this morning? Coat or no coat. Tie or no tie. Button-down or pullover. Dress or slacks. No, there is no evidence that this matters to God. But there is a garment that is incredibly important to God: the kind of heart we are wearing.

Conclusion

Yesterday, I saw his picture on *Facebook*. He looked harmless enough. He was holding a tiny newborn baby. I assume this was his grandchild.

I have not talked to James in almost 30 years. He spoke to our youth group at Hawley. He talked about life in prison. He talked about life before prison. He talked about being a crazy man in Dallas. Crime. Violence. Drugs. In and out of jail and finally prison. It was there he came to know Jesus and became a Christian. I remember sitting in the old Hawn Freeway Church of Christ building. He spoke of life in prison. He showed the class how he made a weapon out of a sock with a bar of soap inside. I was in college at the time, and he had my attention. I remember my amazement at how Jesus had changed his life.

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Five Non-Negotiables
The Treasure of God's Ministry #7
2 Corinthians 4:1-7
 December 6, 2009

Focus Statement: God transforms us by making us into a people who practice humble service.

Function: For all of us to model service that is consistent with the Gospel rather than living in a way that contradicts the Gospel.

Introduction

A few weeks ago I took my mother to Arkansas for the funeral of her brother. The funeral was in Monticello, Arkansas – a place we used to visit often when I was growing up. To look at a map, it seems to be pretty easy to get there. You exit I-30 at Hope, Arkansas, and take Hwy. 278 the rest of the way there. Sounds easy enough except along the way the road occasionally changes directions and one sometimes has to make a left or right in order to stay on this road. At one point, I apparently missed a sudden turn. We came to a stop sign and 278 was nowhere to be found. I turned my telephone on and looked at the map. I pushed one button and a blue light began flashing, showing me where we were on the map. We were not far off at all. Amazing that a satellite can find me in my car in southern Arkansas.

John Ortberg writes:

... the irony of our day is that while maps have given way to global navigation systems, while a satellite can pinpoint our location and direct us from thousands of miles away, we have lost a sense of moral or spiritual bearing. We have exponentially increased our ability to locate our bodies, but lost confidence in the capacity to locate our direction, our souls.

John Ortberg, *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, p. 247

For Paul, everything is anchored in the gospel. Body, soul, mind, and heart. That anchor is very much reflected in what Paul says about his ministry.

The following are five characteristics of Paul's ministry. These are five non-negotiables.

1. We do not lose heart (4:1).

[Note – This is a terrible chapter break. This is actually a continuation of the argument that is going on.]

“Because of this [better translation than ‘therefore’], we do not shrink back” (Gordon D. Fee, “2 Corinthians,” Lecture). Because God is transforming our lives (3:7-18) and because we are in his mercy, we do not lose heart. God has begun this work in our lives; consequently, we do not lose heart.

We might have given up on the Corinthians. After all, think about this mess! Rampant immorality, division, and now there are opponents who say that Paul just doesn't measure up. Yet, he doesn't throw up his hands and say, “It is hopeless.” Rather, he says that we have been given this ministry by God's mercy.

There are many reasons in the life of a church that might prompt us to become discouraged. Ultimately, we do not become discouraged because God is powerfully at work, through his Spirit, transforming people (4:16).

How else could you explain how a congregation holds together if it is not for God's transforming Spirit (3:18)?

2. We renounce disgraceful and underhanded ways (4:2).

Apparently Paul's opponents practiced "secret and shameful" ways. They must have been deceitful.

In the first century, some of the professional orators were money-minded. The orators would send someone around to collect the fees. The orators could make these people feel good or say only what pleased them. Some scholars believe this may be what he was making reference to.

Paul renounces doing *God's* work the *world's* way. The world's way is to make things happen by manipulation, playing one group off another. God's way is not manipulative. It dishonors him and discourages people. Only when we choose the way of Jesus, with his self-emptying mind, will we avoid this kind of thing. With Jesus, we no longer seek the upper hand.

Manipulators will play one group off the other. The manipulator meets with the parents of small children and says, "You wouldn't believe what some of those parents of high school age kids are saying about the children's ministry. I just thought some of you needed to know." Then this person goes to the parents of the small kids and says, "You can't believe what they are saying in that youth group."

After all that the Lord has done for you, can't you at least be a part of a small group?

Don't you want God to bless your finances? You need to start giving in the right way.

Your mother will be so proud of you when you straighten up your life!

Aren't you ashamed wearing those old clothes when everybody else is dressed nicely?

GOD TOLD ME that you don't need to be looking at other job possibilities.

All of you who will promise to read your Bible every day, stand up!

Don't you think God is ashamed of this old carpet, these bad lights, and this old building?

Everybody else is going to the retreat. Aren't you going to join them? What will they think of you?

-- source unknown

Always ask when someone is attempting to manipulate you:

- What does this person want me to know?
- Why is he telling me this?

3. We do not tamper with God's word (4:2).

Are we embarrassed by what the Bible says on a particular subject? Are we afraid of upsetting people? [Illus. – preaching on homosexual behavior one Sunday morning and a couple walking out]

Ministers can be tempted to skim over something difficult because it could upset some people. Do we challenge one another to think? Do we open the Bible to hear God's word on a particular subject in a new, fresh way?

Yet, we must ask: Are we people pleasers or are we God pleasers? Are we more concerned with being liked by people or being approved by God?

4. We set forth the "open statement of the truth" (4:2).

In doing this we commend ourselves to everyman's conscience "in God's sight." We are wide-open books for everyone to read.

We are not speaking to please people but to please God. God is our witness. We need to be conscious that we are speaking in *the sight of God*. God watches what goes on – during the preparation and during the delivery. It would be awful to know that we displeased God by our ministry.

The first thing that should come to my mind about the assembly on a Sunday morning is not whether or not I liked it or whether or not other people seemed to like it. Rather, I should be thinking about whether or not God is happy with me (John 5:39-44).

5. We preach Jesus as Lord and "ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (4:5).

"We do not preach ourselves" (4:5). Ministry is not about impressing people. It is not about being a part of a personality cult following one person regardless of what he does. Paul saw himself as a servant. He was there to serve the church, not himself. His gifts were to serve others, not to serve himself.

We say something about ourselves. We are slaves for you: "doulos" (household servant). What we preach is Christ as Lord, and we are your servants for the sake of Jesus. God has given us a job. Get on with it. This is your work. Yet, we do this within the body of Christ. We do this even when the behavior of the church has disappointed us. (Note: 4:12-15.)

Concerned about the language we hear. Employer/employee. We all are accountable to Jesus as Lord. He is the one who concerns us. He is the one who is Lord.

Christ as Lord. Christ is the “image of God.” Look at this contrast. Jesus is a manifestation of the glory of God. The God who spoke light out of darkness has done this for us. In contrast to the god of this world, he blinded us! And, Jesus allows us to see because of the Spirit.

But, we “are having this treasure” in jars of clay (4:7). Probably refers to the life that comes from the gospel. We are fragile servants. We are clay pots. He has put in us his word (both his living word and his written word). The idea is to draw attention to *God* not ourselves. The intention is for people to come away impressed with God.

Conclusion

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What if I'm on the Second Team?
The Treasure of God's Ministry #8
2 Corinthians 4:7-12
December 13, 2009

Focus Statement: God is displaying his treasure so that we might be aware of the source of the real power.

Function: To encourage us to place our confidence in the treasure instead of the appearance of the vessel.

Introduction

The Heisman Trophy was awarded yesterday. Five great candidates. Millions of people watched this. We talk about winning state, national championship, Super Bowl, World Series. Meanwhile, most of us experience life as more ragged. Most of us are on the “second team.” Most of us never get singled out because we are winners. We may instead identify with Cumberland College.

The worst defeat in college football came in 1916 when Georgia Tech defeated tiny Cumberland College of Kentucky 222 to 0. GT scored 32 touchdowns. Cumberland never even made a first down. The much smaller Cumberland players were being mauled. Halfway through the first half, one of the Cumberland backs fumbled the ball. As it rolled toward his teammate, he yelled, “Pick it up; pick up the ball!”

His teammate yelled back, “You pick it up. *You* dropped it.”

We know how he felt. Sometimes our situation looks so hopeless we feel like giving up.

Do you know any super-heroes? There are those comic book characters: Spiderman, Superman, Batman. Some of us may feel as if we are expected to be a supermom/ super house manager/super wife, etc.

Some seem to be super-Christians much like those Paul referred to as “super-apostles.” Those were people in the church at Corinth who had apparently set themselves up as superior to Paul (11:5, 12:11).

1. Our “jar of clay” is where God has placed a treasure (4:7).

He did this 2,000 years ago when he sent Jesus to the earth (Philippians 2:5-8). So here was the eternal son of God, a part of the Trinity, living in a sack of skin. Jesus experienced the human body. It was subject to hunger, pain, bleeding, and then dying (13:4).

Now consider the “jar of clay” that was Paul’s life on several occasions in 2 Corinthians.

- 2 Corinthians 4:8-10
- 2 Corinthians 6:3-10
- 2 Corinthians 11:16-29

That jar of clay in Paul’s life exposed every weakness and vulnerability. That jar of clay is what is on the external.

- *Family at the Table* – It is what is happening in the conversations that matters.
- *Mission Waco Christmas* – People wait for hours, some all night. It is what is on the inside.

2. Our “jar of clay” exposes our weakness (12:7-10).

Note 4:7. These clay jars were disposable and readily available. These containers were cheap, ordinary, and fragile.

I don’t know that he means to suggest that the vessel protects the treasure. The vessel doesn’t provide much protection nor is this something of beauty that you might find at Pottery Barn. The emphasis seems to be a contrast. The vessel was priceless while the other really has nothing to contribute – no piece of art to be admired and fawned over, just cheap pottery. Now that is you, me, and this church.

Remember that some people were very critical of Paul for *not* boasting. Finally he says, “If you want me to boast, I will boast of what shows my weakness.” Such weakness shows the

“all-surpassing power is from God.” This is why we do not lose heart. The very life of God is seen in all of us:

- As clay pot individuals. Times when life is hard. You didn’t know it would be this way.
- As clay pot families. Times when we experience disappointment, death, disease, heartache. You didn’t know it would be this way.
- A clay pot church. One step forward and two back. You didn’t know it was going to be this way.

Far too often, we seem to value the vessel more than the treasure.

How much is it worth to you?

- Your financial means.
- Your appearance.
- Your abilities.

Next to the Gospel, our treasure – our vessels – are worth nothing. Our vessels remind us of death, but life is at work in Christ. “So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you” (4:12).

A Knoxville, Tennessee, newspaper once carried two articles about similar situations in which the main characters had opposite reactions. The first was a story of a boy who jumped off the Henley Bridge after being jilted by his sweetheart. The boy left a note behind that read, “To Whom It May Concern: I’m going to jump off this bridge because my people are all against me, and the only one I ever loved is mad at me, and I think this is the only way out.” So he jumped. The other was a brief editorial comment about a young Air Force corporal who, when his girlfriend jilted him, wrote out of his heartache a country song. The tune became a hit and netted him \$20,000. When your romance fails, don’t jump off a bridge. Write a song and get rich!

3. Our “jar of clay” leaves room for God’s treasure to be cherished.

Some people thought that the ability of the philosophers to deal with suffering came from their own power. Paul says that *his* power came from God (4:7).

The response to weakness is to thank God that in this weakness he can display his power. His power is displayed in the life of Jesus coming through us (4:10-12).

The biblical depiction of life begins with the words “In the beginning God . . .” And it ends with a magnificent future that is also created by God. Just about everything in

between also testifies to the eternal truth that life is made, redeemed, and certainly blessed by God. It's a gift to be received with humility and gratitude, not an achievement.

M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet*, p. 8

- **Let us focus on the treasure, not the vessel.** The vessel will always be messy and imperfect.
- **Let us be less anxious about our “weaknesses.”** The messy imperfect vessel cannot keep you from real life.
- **Let us be focused on allowing the treasure to be revealed.**
- **The treasure is the very life of Jesus revealed in our bodies.**

Conclusion

You have to admire people who, when the situation looks bad, are able to make the most of it. In 1852, many California vineyard owners were going bankrupt because of a drought. All the grapes had just shriveled up on the vines. One vineyard owner picked them anyway, took them to the market, and advertised them as Peruvian delicacies. We've been eating raisins ever since! We all need that kind of resilient attitude, that kind of ingenuity. Every life is going to have trouble. Everybody is going to get knocked down; but we've got to get back up and make the most of it.

J. Wallace Hamilton once said: “Every man's life is a diary in which he means to write one story and he's forced to write another.”

So what do I do with my weakness? On one level, I could say, “Nothing.” But on another level, I can admit it and know that life is not something that I construct but is receiving what God has given me.

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What We Preach
The Treasure of God's Ministry #9
2 Corinthians 4:1-18
January 17, 2010

Focus Statement: God has given his church a ministry that calls for the right motives, manner, and message.

Function: To encourage us to have a high view of our ministry with an appropriate response to such a view.

Introduction

Some good slogans –

“The milk chocolate melts in your mouth, not in your hand.” M&M, 1954
 “Reach out and touch someone.” AT&T, 1979
 “Please don’t squeeze the Charmin.” Charmin, 1964
 “Sometimes you feel like a nut, sometimes you don’t.” Almond Joy/Mounds
 “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is.” Alka-Seltzer, 1976
 “Have it your way right away.” Burger King, 1973
 “M’m! M’m! Good!” Campbell’s Soup, 1935
 “Can you hear me now? Good.” Verizon

Others, not so good.

1. Sometimes Slogans Lose Their Punch

Have you noticed that words and phrases lose their punch? The church has always had its slogans. They have become all too familiar. One of the most difficult challenges is to be found in just putting a title on a sermon. What at one time may have gotten the attention of people and even caused them to want to hear it, may now not even attract attention or may even drive people away. How easy it is to say the same words over and over and to be so predictable. One may have grown up hearing words like “lost,” “saved,” and “gospel.”

There were certain phrases that served as creedal statements for the early church. “Creed” means “I believe.” It is a statement of belief. The statement “Jesus is Lord” (4:6) is a statement of belief.

This particular statement was startling in the first century. It communicated a truth that distinguished the Christians from others in the world. In a world where there were many “gods” and many “lords” (1 Cor. 8:5), the Christians were saying that there is only *one* Lord. He is *the* Lord. He is a man named Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, the son of Joseph and Mary, and reared in Nazareth. The early Christians refused to believe in any other lords. Not even Caesar was Lord.

What do we do with such slogans after they are used repeatedly? Sometimes they become empty words. Sometimes we find that we still say the words but there is little meaning. Perhaps we need to once again look at that very familiar but significant phrase: “Jesus is Lord.”

What does this mean?

- Life is not a matter of luck.
- Life is not a matter of fate.
- Life is not a matter of having the right connections.
- Life is not a matter of being born in the right circumstances.

Rather, *life is in God's hands!*

[Illus. – Mike Barnacle comment after the Haiti earthquake, “God is kind of funny” sending an earthquake to this very poor island]

2. More Than a Slogan

Paul repeats this very familiar phrase at a point when his very integrity and credibility as a minister is being questioned. He was purported to be a person who really had no commitment to these people but who was using his ministry to advance himself. This is just the kind of cynicism that is alive and well today. Some advance themselves through business; others advance themselves through knowledge. There are those who believe that the minister is no different. He is in the religion business to promote himself. He uses various religious slogans and phrases to build his own kingdom, the church. It is at this point that Paul reflects upon his ministry.

3. Reflections on Our Ministry

- **The Motive and Method behind Our Ministry (4:1-2)**

“We have renounced secret and shameful ways.” Paul says, “I am not a huckster. Nor do I have a hidden agenda.” Not long ago I read a paragraph written by a minister as he commented upon the ministry of another. The comment was made, “He knows where this is headed.” What he was saying is that this person had a hidden agenda. That may or may not be true. Paul says, “We do not use deception nor do we distort the word of God.

- **The Message at the Heart of Our Ministry (4:5).**

“We do not preach ourselves ...”

This is a tough one. It may be much easier to sense it in someone else. It can occur when the message is subordinated to something else. It can be that what is displayed is one's learning, one's ability, one's eloquence, or one's humor. The message can even subordinate to a display in opinions and prejudices. We can preach ourselves when we make no serious attempt to deal with the message of the Bible. Perhaps we decide that the word of God is boring and lifeless and that we “know all of that.” Consequently, we may think we have more to offer. We preach ourselves when we think it is more important to be clever than to be biblical.

“... but Jesus Christ as Lord.”

Preaching is often seen as haranguing. Preaching is using plenty of “shoulds.” You talk with someone at work and she says, “Don’t preach to me.” This suggests something that is negative and judgmental. Yet, preaching has another major function. It is making an announcement! It is giving people a memory. It is giving people something to hold on to. Preaching reminds us of a foundational truth: Jesus is Lord. It is interesting that in the midst of perplexing problems that Paul affirms that Jesus is Lord (1 Corinthians 15:3).

How does a person decide what to preach? What I want to do is to allow Scripture to speak rather than randomly select texts. I typically preach through a book or major section of a book either Sunday morning or Sunday evening. It causes me to have to address a number of things that I may not address otherwise. It is important to me to preach the whole gospel. It is important that I ask if my preaching is keeping the larger picture before these people. Does my preaching not only deal with the “shoulds” and “oughts” but also make the announcement?

“Jesus Christ as Lord” – This was one of the earliest statements of faith or creedal statements. This particular statement was more than a slogan to the early Christians and must be so in our day. We are preaching Jesus as *Lord*. We are not preaching a dead creed that is no longer applicable to our situation in life. We are talking about someone we believe to be able! As we preach him and as we center in on him, this major doctrinal statement helps shape our lives. He is the Lord of my mind, body, heart and emotions. As one who preaches, I need to regularly ask, “Is the message ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ shaping my life?” When we preach Jesus as Lord, it is important that we call for whatever response may be appropriate because of the nature of that particular text. Repentance. Obedience. Gratitude.

Our message is not:

- You can have what you want both now and in the hereafter.
- Live better and you will go to heaven.
- Do church right and your future will be good.

• The Treasure of Our Ministry (4:7)

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay.” Ever notice that when you pass by a jewelry store window that a diamond ring will be on display in a black case? Our lives are frail. We are a people who struggle with sin. Every day we will give “fresh evidence” that we are still sinners. Yet, it is in such a life that we know that the power in our lives is not from us but from God.

Conclusion

Perhaps this little phrase “Jesus is Lord” is more than a religious slogan. Perhaps it describes the very core of our faith.

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God Controls the Calendar
The Treasure of God's Ministry #10
2 Corinthians 4:13 - 5:10
January 24, 2010

Focus Statement: In spite of what Paul's critics say, his ministry is being shaped by the decisive acts of God.

Function: To encourage the church to have a consciousness of living between the "already" and the "not yet."

Introduction

She was teaching her high school class one day when her students brought up a particular subject. She asked them how they would go about finding information regarding that subject. She said that she expected they would all say that they would Google the subject and see what came up. No, that wasn't the answer she got. She said that many of them told her that they would ask "ChaCha." I then asked her, "What is ChaCha?" She said, "Those were my exact words to them." ChaCha is a way that you can send a text message and then get an answer in just a few seconds.

Here are some of the most popular questions on ChaCha:

- *What are some of the top business schools in the country?
- *Where can I find a laptop for under \$300?
- *Where can you watch free movies online?
- *How do you make salsa?

The future is amazing. And, the future is not yet here. We are a people who constantly think about our future. We think about the quality of our air, our water, and our economy. Yet, we live in an interesting time.

Think of the changes these last 30 years! Who knows what our future holds?

As amazing as the future will be on this earth, what is even more amazing is the future that God has designed for his people.

1. God's actions in time impact our ministry. God's actions impact the way we look at ministry and time.

- **We have hope because God controls the calendar, not fate** (4:16). Yes, our bodies are "wasting away," but the greater reality is that there is ongoing renewal into the image of Christ.

In other words, because of what God has in store for us, the present is not something that we have to lose heart over. Now he is not trying to minimize the trials that you or anyone else might experience. Rather, he wants to put all of our difficulties (including his own) into God-centered perspective. No matter what, in Christ, we have hope!

- **We have confidence because of what God has done and what he will do.** God raised Jesus from the dead (4:14). He doesn't lose heart in the midst of physical decay (4:16). There is an eternal dwelling, a home, for us beyond this existence (5:1). God is active and has built us a home. The future is dependent on the one who has been at work.
- **We look to the future with joy because the Holy Spirit who lives within us** (individually and collectively as a church) **is God's down payment of what is to come.**
- **We will one day have new bodies in the age to come.** We will not be disembodied spirits or souls floating through the air. What we have to look forward to is better than our present situation.
- **We are obedient to God's call to live a godly life in anticipation of the final judgment.**

2. This is about the decisive acts of God! We live between the already and the not yet.

Think for a moment about the biblical view of time. Time is more than a minute, an hour, a day, a month, a season or a year. Time is about God breaking through life to transform life as we know and experience it.

Yes, there was the "day of the Lord." However, this was not a single moment in history but rather referred to a decisive moment when God would break through. In some way the peoples of the earth would have to account for their actions and behaviors.

When we think about salvation or the end, we could use the words "already" and "not yet."

Note in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 that Jesus reigns over his kingdom and yet he has to destroy the opposing "dominion, authority, and power." Jesus is *already* king of his kingdom and

yet he will not totally rule until later when the “not yet” becomes a reality (Revelation 11:15).

Already?

- The new age has come.
- Jesus rules as Lord.
- The last days have begun.
- God reigns.

Yet, there is a sense in which some things in God’s plan have not yet happened.

Not yet?

- We have not yet experienced the final consummation of this life.
- We have not yet achieved the perfection for which God has destined us.

The challenge today is how to live between the “already” and the “not yet.” How do we live as God’s people in a world that is sinful and corrupt and a world in which humans still die, where tragedy still happens? How are we to live in this “present evil age”?

Evidently there are some who are too focused on what is seen and have ignored or forgotten what is unseen. The idea is that we are called to trust or put faith in what God is doing in this world as he moves us toward the “not yet.” In other words we declare, “Jesus is Lord” while we cry out “Come, Lord Jesus.”

What if we don’t believe that God reigns and controls the calendar? What if we don’t believe that we live in God’s time? What if we don’t believe that we live between the “already” and the “not yet”?

We will live as if this is all there is. We will attempt to somehow reverse the clock. We may see sexual activity as a cure-all. Or, we may think that changing spouses will help. We will do *anything* to make the most of our existence.

We had better eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we will die.

3. All of this impacts how we see our ministry.

- **We do not have to fear change.** Len Sweet has said that many churches deal with the winds of change by just trying to stay close to the harbor. If we can just hold on and not venture out into the sea then we will not be hurt by the storm. The storm of change is scary and we don’t know what to do and so we think “just play it safe.” Well, you can get killed doing that.

We do not have to hunker down and try to prevent change in a little community. Sometimes we are like the Amish [Illus. – Visit to Amish community at Christmas]. If

we can just preserve some semblance of life the way it used to be then all will be well. As Len Sweet says, we live in a TGIF culture (Twitter, Google, Internet, Facebook). This culture values EPIC (experiential, participating, image, connected).

Yet, we do not have to fear these changes. Jesus has not changed.

- **We must fix our eyes on the reality of the unseen. God is in control.** We believe that God is creator and Lord of all. Consequently, we believe that real life is to be found in trusting and obeying him and not in assuming that we know best.

Conclusion

This week, in an editorial published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, Elin Ekblom-Bak of the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences suggested that authorities rethink how they define physical activity to highlight the dangers of sitting.

Here's a new warning from health experts: Sitting is deadly. Scientists are increasingly warning that sitting for prolonged periods – even if you also exercise regularly – could be bad for your health. And it doesn't matter where the sitting takes place – at the office, at school, in the car, or before a computer or TV – just the overall number of hours it occurs.

I guess this remains to be seen, but the point is well taken. Churches sure need to be attentive to this. We can sit and sit as we face the storms of the future and we do so at our peril. Let us step into the storm and be a people with mission.

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Standing in Awe of God
The Treasure of God's Ministry #11
2 Corinthians 5:6-13
January 31, 2010

Focus Statement: Paul defines his apostleship and declares his reverence for judgment and his appreciation for the mission of God.

Function: To cause the hearers to value the awe of God that creates an urgency for reconciliation.

Introduction

1. Live by Faith before Our Awesome God.

We live by faith not sight. We stand in reverence and awe of our loving God. This awe means that we take a new look at our day. No matter what, we make it our goal to please him. This is what we want more than anything.

Our greatest passion should be for the pleasure of God.

Yet, far too often, we play to the crowd. We live as if our greatest passion is for the approval and acceptance of others.

Yet, what would my life be like if I lived for the pleasure of God?

Eric Liddell once said, "When I run, I feel his pleasure."

Does my work bring him pleasure? Does my marriage bring him pleasure? Do my friendships bring him pleasure? Does my speech bring him pleasure?

So, we make it our goal to please him!

2. Live by Faith Even to the Final Judgment.

The reality is we must (literally: "It is necessary.") *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body whether good or bad.

We must not leave the impression that the behavior of Christians is not terribly important. The New Testament scholar Bruce Winter has observed that often this text is not received very well by Christians. This is especially true of Christians who understand that they are saved by the grace and mercy of God. Yet, the question is, how will this look as we stand before Christ?

Some have the view that the God of grace is indulgent and passive. With such a view, one might justify most any immoral behavior with "God understands my heart." In contrast to this, Paul says that we are accountable to God for what we say and do. The grace of God does not dismiss accountability. Paul does not fear judgment as if he might be lost. After all, he has already said that he anticipates being with the Lord. He has already spoken of the new body that we will have after death.

At the same time, he is very clear that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Perhaps we could, as Christ-followers, see this as a time of evaluation and a time during which we come before the Lord Jesus and desire to see his pleasure for all that was done in the body.

Perhaps Paul is especially wanting his opponents to hear that there will come a day when all of their accusations will be clear and it will be obvious who is authentic and who is not.

3. Live by Faith as We Carry Out the Mission.

We live by faith as our reverence for God causes us to care about men and women who do not know Jesus as Lord and Savior. He says that since we know what it is to fear the Lord, we persuade men.

He persuades others not by certain rhetoric or trickery. Rather, he depends upon the message of Christ's love. He has already spoken of "setting forth the truth plainly" (4:2).

Paul indicates that if his critics knew him the way God knows him, they would change their minds about him.

What does it mean to fear God?

For a Christ-follower, the fear of the Lord is not about fearing God's punitive power (Luke 12:4-5). It is not about fearing his eternal punishment (1 John 4:8, 18). Rather, this is an attitude of reverent awe of God (Proverbs 15:33).

- **I am in awe of God, realizing that I am his subject in this kingdom.**
- **I desire the pleasure of this king. After all, he has all power and authority. My life, my work, and my future are in his hands.**
- **I look to his rule and learn dependency, submission, and trust.**

Being clear about God's sovereignty and Jesus' lordship can move us from the futility of trusting in people more than trusting in God.

It is fundamental spiritual blunder to be more concerned about pleasing people than about pleasing God and to be more afraid of human disapproval than divine disapproval.

Ken Boa, Conformed to His Image, p. 133

Conclusion

What we are talking about this morning is a life of passion – passion for the things that matter. We desire to give God pleasure. We desire to live in awe of this glorious God even to the final judgment. We desire to persuade others to give this God his due.

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Let's Always Be a Dead Church
The Treasure of God's Ministry #12
2 Corinthians 5:11-21
February 14, 2010

Focus Statement: Paul defends his ministry by reminding these readers of the gospel story that changes the world.

Function: To hear the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and the healing/reconciliation that is the result of this.

Introduction

[Last Sunday sick and then the next day missed Fred's funeral. But then on the other end, we learned that we could announce that we are going to be grandparents in September.]

Story of West Virginia church – I heard about this church when I was in college. In fact, this church was known throughout the United States for its innovation and its desire to reach people with the gospel. I asked my host, "Could we drive by this church?" This person responded that there wasn't much to see anymore but that we could drive by there. It was sad. What had evidently been a vibrant church some years earlier was now dated and empty with weeds everywhere. I asked what had happened to this church. The host said, "They fought and fussed and people just finally left."

It struck me this week that every church is a dying church in some sense:

- *Some churches are literally dying. They are slowly losing people and will likely shut down.*
- *Some churches are glitzy and successful. They look vibrant and alive, but they're really only alive to themselves and their institution. They look alive, but they're dying and they don't know it.*
- *Then there's the church that could be big or small, glitzy or drab, that dies to itself daily – that has taken up the cross and is more concerned with following Christ, no matter what it costs, than its survival.*

All churches are dying. Only the third type of church will experience a resurrection.

-- Darryl Dash, "Every Church is Dying," *DashHouse.com*, posted August 6, 2009

1. Some people focus on what is seen.

- Some people judge others by their outward appearance (5:12). By this standard, these people believed that Paul was lacking. They believed Paul to be a worldly or unspiritual man (1:17; 5:16). Meanwhile, Paul reminds us that God will judge the heart on the day of judgment (5:10).
- What we are is known to God.
- (5:12) James W. Thompson writes:

The word which is rendered "answer" in the RSV (aphorme) was a military word for the basis of operations in a military campaign. At times the word was used for the resources necessary for a campaign. The success or failure of a military campaign depended on adequate resources and supply lines. For Paul, the church also is left defenseless without provisions for the campaign. In our case, the provisions are answers – the essentials of the faith. It was as if Paul had said, "How can I talk about my work as God's servant without returning to the most fundamental principles of all? If we lose these principles, we have lost everything!"

James W. Thompson, *The Mark of a Christian*, p. 84

Ministry is more than can be seen.

Some of the most important ministry of this church will never be highlighted or talked about. For example, our church is particularly good about caring for people who are sick, people who are in the hospital, and families that have experienced a death. [Illus. – Fred and Clara]

Our ministries belong to God. "All this is from God" (5:18-19).

2. One Died for All – Therefore All Died (5:14)

• One Died for All

The love of Christ has captivated him or overwhelmed him. The love of Jesus controls him (5:14). Hear his motivation? He is not about self-interest. Rather, he ministers to others on behalf of others. Jesus died for me. In fact, he died for all.

Think of the hundreds of athletes from 82 nations in Vancouver for the Winter Olympics. Each one has sacrificed in order to compete at that level.

• Therefore All Died

- **We are a part of a dead church or at least we ought to be!** Typically if someone refers to a church as dead, it is not a flattering thing to say. Yet, because "one died for all, all have died." The church is to die! **We are to no longer live for**

ourselves. The Gospel has shaped us so that we no longer live for ourselves but for him. Paul is saying that his motivation for ministry is rooted in Jesus' death for others.

Now, the reality of our lives has shifted.

C. S. Lewis writes on dying to ourselves.

Your real, new self (which is Christ's and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him. . . . The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 190

- **We are a part of a new creation (5:16-17).**

As stated in the NEB: "When anyone is united in Christ, there is a whole new world" (5:16). We now have a whole different way of looking at life.

What was once important is no longer important. What was once not important is now *very* important. Everything old has passed away. The new has come.

- **We have an identity that must not be underestimated.**

We are ambassadors. We are personal representatives of God on earth. God is working through us to reconcile men and women to Him. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation. This is about reconciling the self to God and to others. There is even a sense in which we are in the process of becoming whole internally because of this reconciliation.

God has given us our ministry to be a part of reconciling men and women to Him. Our task is to issue the invitation of Jesus, his work on the cross, that others might become the righteousness of God [Illus. – counselor who works with a warring couple]. Note that it is not just salvation but transformation – not just reconciliation but transformation.

This is the kind of ministry that God wants to see in his church, not one characterized by selfishness but by living for God and for others.

3. How does this speak to my ministry today?

What this means is that this story shapes our ministry. We are prone to rely on what makes us comfortable and what feels like what we have always known.

Or, we might simply shape our ministry by whatever might get the attention of people around us.

“Ministry consists not in self-gratification but total dedication to the well-being of others, as exemplified in the life of Christ” (Jerome Murphy-O’Conner, *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians*, p. 56).

A living church is one that is dead. That is, we are dying to self.

- We die to self when we speak of good things that our brother or sister has done instead of focusing on his/her weakest moment.
- We die to self when we forgive instead of continuing to focus on where the other person or group falls short.
- We die to self when we thank God instead of complaining.
- We die to self when we choose to keep our lips pressed together in silence instead of saying something negative and cutting toward our brother.
- We die to self when we live with our families as godly, peace-loving men and women instead of forever agitating one another.

Conclusion

The truth is: All ministry is connected by the story of one dying for all. Your parents’ church may look very different than this church. I suspect that Crestview in 1954 looked somewhat different than it does 56 years later. Your adult children may be drawn to a church that looks different. Yet, we remain anchored by the story of one dying for all.

It seems like change is constant. Our heads are just left spinning because of the rapid change that we experience. What will never, ever change is our story. One died for all.

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No Longer Broken
The Treasure of God's Ministry #13
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
February 21, 2010

Focus Statement: Paul speaks regarding reconciliation, desiring to promote healing in this church.

Function: To encourage the hearers to take seriously our role as ambassadors.

Introduction

1. Sometimes we just don't get along.

You know when things just aren't right. Maybe this involves your marriage, your children, or a friend. Maybe this relates to others in the body of Christ. This is very real.

[Illus. · Distant family member: "We don't go over there." · Funeral for man in KC at which police were asked to be present. Two families estranged. · Families in church not speaking due to "school board issues."]

We want things to go a certain way. When they don't go a certain way, we demand.

Listen, for example, to some possible demands (source unknown).

- "I work hard all week. Don't I deserve a little peace and quiet when I come home?"
- "I worked two jobs to put you through school; I deserve your respect and appreciation."
- "I spend hours managing the family budget; I really need a new computer."
- "The Bible says we should save up to cover unexpected problems; we need to tighten our budget so we can put more into savings."
- "God has given me a gift for developing new businesses, and he calls me to work hard to support our family. I deserve to have more of your support."
- "Scripture says a husband and wife should be completely united in love. I need to have more intimacy with you."
- "I only want what God commands: children who have learned to respect their parents and use their God-given gifts to the fullest."

So often, when we are in conflict with someone, we focus intently on the other person's (or group's) faults, blunders, etc. We know not only what they did wrong but also what they need to do in order to make things right. Meanwhile, God calls us to examine our own hearts (Matthew 5:19).

Yet, the greatest estrangement is between God and us. God stepped in and through Christ made things right. In fact, there is a sense in which he is creating a whole new world.

When we don't get along:

- **Our desires become demands.** (Our demands, of course, are reasonable.)
- **When our demands are not met, we judge.** (I don't have to put up with this.)
- **We criticize.** (I'm just speaking the truth.)
- **We attack and demonize.** (This person can do nothing right and doesn't have good intentions.)
- **We condemn.** (Who needs them?)

2. The Difference Christ's Love Makes (5:14)

- **We are a part of a new creation (5:16-17).**

What was once important is no longer important. What was once not important is now *very* important. Everything old has passed away. The new has come. As stated in the NEB, "When anyone is united in Christ, there is a whole new world" (5:17). We now have a whole different way of looking at life.

This world belongs to God and it is a new world. God has taken the initiative to reconcile himself to his world. His creation was beautiful and spotless and then became broken and corrupt. Now God has reconciled himself to this creation through Jesus. Something has happened in Christ and now we promote a new possibility through him.

- **We are ambassadors who serve a king with worldwide rule (5:18-20).**

We are personal representatives of God on earth. God is working through us to reconcile men and women to Him. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation. This is about reconciling the self to God and to others. There is even a sense in which we are in the process of becoming whole internally because of this reconciliation.

- **We, as reconcilers, have both a ministry (5:18) and a message (5:19).**

God has given us our message! Our task is to issue the invitation of Jesus, his work on the cross, that others might become the righteousness of God. Note that it is not just salvation but transformation – not just reconciliation but transformation.

Note verse 21. Paul speaks of his ministry as being more than something spoken. Rather, this is something embodied. God has been faithful to his covenant. Paul is called to embody or live out that faithfulness.

This is the kind of ministry that God wants to see in his church – not one characterized by selfishness but by living for God and for others. We are called to go into all the world with a

message from this reigning Lord. The message? God loves everyone and wants everyone to be reconciled to God.

3. **Will you be a reconciler?**

You know what it is like to be out of relationship with someone. One thing we do is deny. We pretend that no problem exists. "I don't have a problem with him or I don't see why I need to go to him." Now, of course, such a non-response usually only makes matters worse.

We have a ministry that must be both proclaimed and embodied. A reconciler is a person who embodies the gospel. This is a person who is compelled by the love of Christ.

If we are not reconcilers, we will be something else. We will be a people who create division or we will be a people who passively sit by, doing nothing to pursue reconciliation. Or, we may flee. We don't want anything to do with the person. We no longer speak to them. We leave the room or change churches so as to not deal with the person any longer. We may even fight. That is, we get angry and act out of our anger.

We are reconcilers. Just as Jesus died for all and therefore all died, he is God's means of reconciling all to himself. We proclaim this. We want to do everything we can to be God's instrument toward reconciling others to Him.

- **Kneel in humility before Jesus who has already taken the initiative to make things right.** "While we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly." Jesus is the first step toward reconciliation.
- **Make the first move toward another.** We make the first move because he did and we believe the presence of Christ can pull us together. We are often slow to do this because we are thinking about who is wrong, who is to blame, etc. This attitude of unforgiveness leads us in a different direction than reconciliation. It is poison and keeps us stuck in immaturity.
- **Follow Jesus toward forgiveness and reconciliation.** If you follow Jesus and take seriously his life and teaching, you will become a forgiving person yourself. How will I do that? Through the resources that God has given me as the result of my own forgiveness.

Conclusion

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