

Countercultural Christian Ministry

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[0 : 0 0] Well, again, let me welcome you this morning. If you're new, especially joining us either in person or online, my name's Tommy.

I'm the rector here, and I'm excited to continue a series in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, what we call 2 Corinthians. And this is really a series about power.

It's a series about power, and it's a series about how the gospel transforms power. It turns power and weakness upside down. That's the theme that we're going to be following for the next several months, actually.

And this week, we're going to be looking at this in the context of Christian ministry. And I don't just mean professional Christian ministry, people who have a career in Christian ministry.

Every single Christian is a Christian minister. We're all Christian ministers. And so, if you're here this morning and you're a Christian, we're talking about you.

[1 : 0 3] If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, you're going to have the opportunity to sit in as we do a little self-reflection, as we think about how we define success in the church.

What does a successful Christian ministry look like? And should we define success in the same way that other institutions in our society define success?

It's interesting being in a place like D.C. when we're out at social gatherings or whatever, and the conversation almost always arises when you meet somebody. Well, what do you do for a living?

And I say, well, I'm a pastor. And invariably, if I get to the next question before the person politely excuses themselves from conversation, the question will be some form of, well, how many people go to your church?

And it's a kind of way, and I don't think that people always mean it this way, but for me, maybe it's my own issues, but it always feels like they're trying to decide how important I am or if I'm worth continuing a conversation with, right?

[2 : 0 7] And Advent's been around for 14 years, and we started as a house church in a living room. And so, it's been interesting to see the evolution of people's responses over the years.

What's more disconcerting is that when I go to pastor conferences or diocesan gatherings, I get the same question, right?

And so, there is a question to be asked, how do we define success in Christian ministry? Should it look like other institutions in our society? So, we're going to be doing a little bit of self-reflection, which I think, given the fact that this is the first Sunday in Lent, is very appropriate, very appropriate.

And we're going to be looking at this section that we just heard Chris read, and we're going to be looking at Paul's ministry as an apostle. And Paul gives us three metaphors for Christian ministry.

Each of these metaphors tells us something about Christian ministry, and all along the way, we're going to be asking ourselves, how do we think about success? How do we define our calling as Christian ministers, which again, we all are Christian ministers, and how different is that?

[3 : 14] How countercultural is it from the surrounding culture? So, we're going to be looking at these three images to guide us. Christian ministry, a triumphal procession, an aroma of life and death, living letters.

What does each of these images tell us about Christian ministry? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that it is not just ink and paper. Your word is living and active because you are living and active.

You're not a deaf, dumb, mute idol. You're a living God in our midst, here now speaking to us, offering yourself to us. And before we come to this table and are nourished by your body and blood, Lord, we pray that we would be nourished by your word, and that in the sacraments and the preaching, we would experience the gospel in stereo.

We pray this, Lord, for our good and our blessing, but ultimately that you would be glorified in our midst. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So, let's look at this passage together.

I want to give you a little context so it makes sense where we are. We're kind of dropping into the middle. I think it was Jeff who said when he introduced this series that when you read 2 Corinthians, it's like dropping into the middle of a pastor's inbox, and that's essentially what we're doing.

[4 : 32] So, let me give you a little context. Paul is writing this letter to address criticism that he's received from some of the Corinthians, including some of the leaders in Corinth, who he later refers to as the super apostles.

And the reason is because he has had some hard words for the Corinthians in terms of how they've been living. He's tried to correct them as their pastor, and they've responded by delegitimizing his ministry.

And they're essentially saying that he's not a legitimate apostle. And the reason is because he's not very apostle-like. He's not very apostle-y in his behavior.

In their minds, you know, if you were to ask one of the Corinthians, what is an apostle? Here's what they would say. Well, number one, an apostle is someone who is uniquely blessed by God. That's true.

Therefore, they would say a true apostle should be a paragon of success because blessing by God means that you're successful, right? Then you look at Paul.

[5 : 34] Paul's ministry is filled with failure. It's filled with evidence of Paul's weakness, including the fact that Paul had changed his mind several times, including one which we see referenced in verses 12 and 13.

He's there in Troas. He's waiting for Titus to come and tell him whether or not the Corinthians have repented from their rebellion. And he has this explosion, this response to the gospel.

It says a door was opened for me there for the gospel. But he's so anxious to know how the Corinthians have responded to his letter that he can't wait in Troas. And so he leaves.

He's got people lining up to be baptized. And he's like, I can't stay. I got to know what's happening with the Corinthians. So he goes on to Macedonia to try to find Titus. They're like, no real apostle of Jesus would abandon Troas when everybody's coming to faith.

This is a huge opportunity. Pentecost part two, and you just left. You obviously don't have your priorities in order. Not a real apostle. Then they would say, you know, well, an apostle is a messenger commissioned personally by Jesus.

[6 : 39] That's also true. But they assumed, well, therefore, a true apostle should be very eloquent, very winsome, very compelling as a public speaker. We established last week Paul is anything but that.

He's a rather boring public speaker, very uninteresting. Third, an apostle is a leader over the church. Therefore, they would say a true apostle should have the most impressive credentials.

Paul didn't have impressive credentials as a Christian leader. In fact, his only credential prior to his conversion is that he built his entire early career persecuting Christians. So not a very qualified leader of the church, right?

So Paul's critics are saying, look at all of these aspects of Paul's ministry. Paul's ministry lacks all of the marks of true Christian ministry. Therefore, Paul is obviously a fraud.

This is the context that we're dropping into. Here's Paul's response that we're going to unpack. It's essentially this. You have completely misunderstood the nature of Christian ministry.

[7 : 42] You've completely misunderstood the nature of Christian ministry. And then he uses three metaphors to refute their assumptions one by one and show us what true Christian looks like.

So the first image or metaphor that Paul uses is the image of the triumphal procession in verses 12 to 14, part A. He says this, but thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.

Now at first glance, what does this seem to imply? It seems to imply that all Christian ministry is like traipsing around the world, being celebrated, people clapping and cheering as we just sort of go from one place to the next, sort of spreading gospel cheer, right?

We're following Jesus in a triumphal procession. We have triumphed over the world. People are happy to see us. Crowds, people line up to hear what we have to say.

Not true, right? In order to understand this, we need to know that the word that Paul uses for triumphal procession is actually a technical term referring to the Roman institution of the triumphal procession.

[8 : 58] One of my former professors, Scott Hafeman, wrote a fantastic commentary on 2 Corinthians, and here's what he says. The triumphal procession was a lavish parade conducted in Rome to celebrate great victories in significant military campaigns.

These were ostentatious celebrations filled with valiant soldiers, the spoils of war, and the most theatrical pomp and circumstance Rome could muster.

There were over 350 recorded victories in Rome's history, and they were all celebrated this way. And here's the key detail.

In order to demonstrate Rome's prowess as the victor, their utter unquestioned dominance, a prominent feature of these celebrations was that you would have the chariot where the person who was leading the procession would be celebrated, and then you would have a long train of prisoners.

Right? The rival kings, the rival generals, the enemies. Right? Imagine, this is probably what Putin fantasizes about doing with Zelensky, right? Marching him back in chains to Moscow, right?

[10 : 10] We have been victorious. This is the kind of thing that Rome would do. They would take the rival leader, the rival king, and they would march them and all of their generals in chains to humiliate them, which was a testament to the power and the glory of Rome, right?

The highest honor that any Roman Caesar or general could receive would be to lead one of these processions. Conversely, to be led as a prisoner in such a procession was the most humiliating sign of defeat you could experience, short of death.

And the prisoners would ultimately be marched to a place where they would be executed. They would be executed to bring glory and honor to Rome and glory and honor to Rome's gods.

So here's the key to understanding what Paul is saying about Christian ministry. In this metaphor, Paul is not the one leading the procession. Paul is the prisoner in chains, following behind Jesus, who leads the procession.

Paul's entire life exists to bring glory and honor to Jesus. Now, we might hear this and be disturbed by the idea of being a prisoner for Christ.

[11 : 27] That's kind of a brutal image. But all throughout Paul's letters, he delights in referring to himself as a prisoner of Christ, even a slave to Christ. That was his favorite title for himself as an apostle.

And the reason is because Paul had realized the truth about the human condition. He had realized in his earlier life that, listen, guess what? Like it or not, we are all slaves to something or to someone.

We are all slaves to something or someone. If you can't stop overeating, you're a slave to food. If you can't stop losing your temper, you're a slave to anger.

If you can't stop conforming to what others expect of you, if you can't say no to people, if you can't draw boundaries that need to be drawn, then you're a slave to the approval of other people.

If you're dating and you can't stop conforming and shifting and compromising in your values and standards so that that other man or woman will be more attracted to you and be more likely to want to date you, you're making that person your master.

[12 : 41] You're their slave. They're calling the shots about the most important things in your life. And so the gospel says, and this is what Paul had realized, the only way for us to be free from the things that enslave us in the world is to become slaves of Christ.

Paul had discovered, I, as a slave to Christ, am free because Christ as my master desires my freedom. In Him, I'm free in a way that I never was before as a Pharisee.

Right, so this is Paul's realization. Now let's just think of the implications of this for this broader question of Christian ministry and how we think about it. This is the first metaphor we're given. The nature of Christian ministry is this, following Jesus in a triumphal procession, which is, now that we know what that means, a death march where we are prisoners.

Right? We need to understand the implications of this for Paul's critics and for us. Paul's critics assumed that being a successful Christian minister means success and prosperity, maybe even celebrity status.

And there were first century church leaders who were very much like celebrities. But in truth, Paul is saying, the nature of Christian ministry is not that you're a celebrity. It's not that you have a massive following.

[14 : 06] It's not that you are celebrated everywhere you go. The nature of Christian ministry is that we're like prisoners following behind Jesus. In other words, it is not about us. It's about Him.

It's not about us. It's about Him. And I think that, and this is just me talking, but I think that one of the main ways that the church in the United States has gone off the rails is because we desperately want to be the ones leading the procession.

We want to be the ones who are celebrated. We want to be the ones who have the prestige and the respectability. We want cultural and political power and influence.

And I think that we have made extraordinarily grievous compromises in order to grab and to hold on to these things. And maybe, if we want a ministry that looks like Paul's ministry, we need to be reminded that we were never meant to be the ones leading the procession.

We are prisoners for Christ's sake. You know, over the last century, many Christians have been praying for revival in our country, like the great revivals of past centuries.

[15 : 22] We've been praying for revival in the church right now. Some of us are praying for that right now. We need another revival in our country, right? But what do we see happening? The church is having to reckon with its culture of celebrity worship as more and more celebrity pastors are toppled from their pedestals because of narcissism and sin and scandal.

Right? We're praying for revival, and yet what we see is the church having to reckon with its complicity in sexual abuse, covering up grievous sin, as well as complicity in racism and injustice.

Right? We're praying for revival, and yet what we see is the church is having to reckon with all of the ways it has compromised its integrity in order to gain and hold political power. Right?

We're praying for revival, and yet the church is having to reckon with all of the ways it has compromised its doctrines in order to appeal to the culture, only to then die out.

Right? So you may look at this, and you may say, well, God has failed to answer our prayer for revival. But what if God is answering our prayer? What if God is answering our prayer?

[16 : 37] In other words, what if before revival can come, there has to be a reckoning? What if this is the road to revival? What if before revival can come, we have to remember who is leading the triumphal procession?

Right? We have to be reminded that it's not about us. It's about Him. So this first metaphor shows us the nature of Christian ministry. We're like prisoners following Jesus in a triumphal procession.

This leads us to the second metaphor, the aroma of life and death. The aroma of life and death. Roman triumphal processions would often include incense, and as the procession passed by, the incense would waft out into the streets for everybody to smell.

And as Paul says in verses 14 through 16, wherever he goes, the aroma of Christ goes with him. What he says is that some people out there see Paul's life and they hear his message and their hearts are immediately open to the gospel because God is already at work in them.

They're compelled by it. Other people see the same life, hear the same message, and their hearts are closed off. They don't respond. You know, it's like some people who get COVID and then after COVID, long after COVID, they have this sense of smell that's totally out of whack, right, where they're like, I know that this thing should smell good to me, but it smells rancid.

[18 : 09] It smells rotten, right? The way you know you are being spiritually renewed the way that you know actually first in the case of COVID that you are healing is when your sense of smell starts to be put right, when things that should smell good smell good and things that should smell bad smell bad.

And so one of the signs that we're experiencing spiritual renewal is when the gospel begins to smell good, when there's something in you that even if you're not a Christian, you're curious. And there are people, some of you are here this morning and you're here and you're not necessarily a Christian, but there's something about this that is attractive to you.

There's something about this that is drawing you. You're curious. You're wanting to learn more. You know, many times in our foundations class, which is our church membership class, it's a 13-week class that we do a couple of times a year, we'll have one or two people in there who are not Christians, but they're just curious.

They want to learn more because something about this smells good. It's attractive to them. And Paul's saying, listen, when people come to faith in places like Troas, where I was, it's not because of my eloquence or my brilliance.

They come to faith because God is already at work in their hearts. Christ is working through me. And I don't often know who those people are. So if the first metaphor showed us the nature of Christian ministry, this metaphor shows us the power in Christian ministry.

[19 : 30] And that power comes from the Holy Spirit, not us. Right? The Holy Spirit, not us. And so you have Paul's critics, they think that Christian ministry depends on our gifts.

And they think it depends on our talents and our natural ability and our charisma, our good looks, our techniques, our strategies, that we have to be impressive in order to bring people to faith.

But the power of Christian ministry comes from the Holy Spirit, not us. You know, for most of us, the whole concept of evangelism makes us deeply uncomfortable because it's so hard to admit to our non-Christian friends and co-workers that we are even Christians, much less share our faith.

Right? Most of us feel like we're just trying to get by and the idea of actually sharing our faith with somebody, it just feels way beyond what we're capable of. And so I hope this is actually a great comfort to be reminded that it actually doesn't depend on us, but on the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now, does that mean that we, doesn't matter if we share our faith? No. What it means is there are people around you in your life right now in whom the Spirit is working, who are open, who do want to know more, who are curious.

[20 : 46] You know, I think about my own experience as a kid growing up, sometimes going to church, sometimes not. My dad wanted us to go to church, my mom didn't, so their compromise was to go once or twice a month.

And so, but we would go and I probably, you know, it was a good church and I probably heard the gospel presented thousands of times in a thousand different ways. I had friends who knew I wasn't really a believer and so they would invite me to their churches to come to their church, their evangelistic events.

And I would sit through their gospel presentations and still, it's like my heart was just like Teflon. It was like Teflon. My heart was a non-stick surface and just nothing stuck. Just totally apathetic when it came to really, I did not care at all.

And then one day when I was about 22, for no discernible reason whatsoever, I started to be open to it.

I started meeting with a guy, talking to him about Christian things and he's a great guy, very well meaning, but he wasn't particularly articulate, he wasn't versed in apologetics. You know, I would ask my kind of stinger gotcha questions and he'd be like, that's a great question, I have no idea.

[21 : 50] And yet somehow I was drawn to it. You know, I read a couple of books that he had given me and frankly, they were cheesy.

They were cheesy books. You know, I love a good book and these were not good books. They were cheesy. But there was something in my heart that was open. And I came to faith. Why?

Because of the amazing apologetics and the incredible books that just spoke to my heart? No, it's because the Holy Spirit was at work in me that I was going to come to faith one way or another. It was going to happen.

And so that's how the Holy Spirit works. So for, listen, for those of us who have friends or family or co-workers or children and we are so anxious wondering, are they ever going to come to faith?

Yes, it's important to know how to phrase things well. It's important to know some apologetics. It's helpful as a Christian to know some of those things. It's important to understand winsome ways of presenting the gospel.

[22 : 51] Absolutely. But the most important thing we can do is to pray because it is the Holy Spirit that will do that work, not us. Right? So that's the power in Christian ministry.

The nature of Christian ministry, we're in a triumphal procession and we are prisoners. The power in Christian ministry, guess what? It's not us. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. And then lastly, we have this third image, living letters.

What's that all about? Chapter 3, verses 1 through 6. To drive his point home, Paul says this, and there is definitely a note of sarcasm here. Definitely sarcasm.

He says, okay, are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Do you want proof? Is my word not enough? You want some proof of my legitimacy?

You want some evidence of my credibility? Do you want a letter of recommendation? Should I go out and get a letter of recommendation? Or do you want to write me a letter of recommendation? Right? What do I need to demonstrate my credibility to you?

[23 : 53] And then what does he say? He says, guess what? You are my letter of recommendation. You want to know my credentials? You are my credentials.

What does he mean by that? The people who are criticizing Paul and delegitimizing his ministry all came to faith through Paul's ministry.

So he's like, you're delegitimizing me as an apostle. You're saying that I'm a fake and a fraud and a phony and yet your own faith came about through God's work in me and through me in your life.

And then he says, listen, you just need to understand this is nothing like the old covenant religion of Judaism. Some of us knew that religion, right?

Where we would write God's laws down on tablets and do our best to follow those laws. This is nothing like that. The apostolic ministry is a new covenant ministry.

[24 : 49] What does that mean? The Holy Spirit is at work right now opening hearts to the truth of the gospel and writing God's laws on our hearts. God has written his law on your heart.

You're my letter of recommendation. You're proof that despite however foolish or weak I may look, God is working through me and your hearts have changed as a result. So, you know, we've seen the nature of Christian ministry, triumphal procession.

We've seen the power of Christian ministry, the Holy Spirit. This is the evidence for Christian ministry. The evidence for the fact that there is something to the gospel that we cannot explain.

There are many churches in our society and I would probably put us in that category with all due respect that have an overblown love of credentials. Have an overblown love of credentials.

As though the gospel is more credible if it's coming from someone with a PhD after their name. Now listen, listen. Am I saying that the answer is to become anti-intellectual?

[25 : 52] Hopefully you know me well enough to know that is absolutely not what I'm saying. Right? And there's a huge I love to study. I love to read. Honestly, there's a big part of me that would love to spend the rest of my life holed up in a university library somewhere.

That is like my happy place. So I love it. But part of me also recognizes the truth that we're seeing here. The most compelling evidence for the truth of the gospel is not the letters after someone's name.

It is the lives that have been transformed. In particular, lives that have been transformed through ministries that don't seem like they could do anything. Much less transform lives.

Ministries that look weak, that look foolish, that are poorly run, the finances are a mess, they seem to have no idea what they're doing. And yet somehow they're producing people that have been completely transformed.

So what Paul is saying is the more foolish I look, the more weak I look, the more I seem to lack all the credentials that you care about, the more it glorifies who? Not me, God.

[26 : 53] Because look at you, look at the fruit in your life. You think I could do this? This is why at one point in this letter he says, who's sufficient for these things? You think a PhD is going to make any difference when it comes to changing lives?

You know, over the years I have seen people who were passing through D.C. on their way, totally focused on career. I've seen them make a 90 degree turn and stop in D.C.

and say, you know, I'm going to root down here and I'm going to live here because I want to be a part of a community. Completely change their life plans. I've seen marriages that I knew that was on the brink of collapse be completely restored and renewed and marriages that are an entirely different place.

Now, some of you are the people that I'm talking about. I've seen people set free from patterns of addiction and cycles of abuse and generational sin. I've seen people go from having years and years of stored up anger and bitterness.

I've seen that anger dissipate. I've seen them forgive people they once hated. I've seen people that have overcome massive, deep political division and embrace and love one another like family.

[28 : 07] Right? When you see things like this, life change, there is no degree in the world that can change lives. This is the kind of thing only God can do.

Right? So, this is how we need to be thinking about Christian ministry at least if we want our ministry to look like the ministry that Paul had in Corinth. This is Paul's countercultural ministry.

The question remains, what gave Paul the courage to be so radically countercultural in the first place? You know, when Paul realized what he was signing up for, a life of following behind Jesus like a prisoner on his way to an execution, what was the thing that compelled Paul to say, that's what I want my life to be about?

And what's the thing that might compel us to say, that's what I want my life to be about? Why would Paul sign up for this? It's because he realized that with Jesus there was one crucial difference from the Roman practice.

In the Roman practice, the one leading the procession would get to the final destination, they would take all the prisoners, they would execute those prisoners to bring glory to the leader of the procession and to the gods that Rome worshipped.

[29 : 18] But in Jesus' triumphal procession, the prisoners are not the ones who were executed. In Jesus' triumphal procession, when they finally arrive at that place at Golgotha, Jesus is the one who gets down off of the chariot, takes off all of the symbols of glory and power and majesty, he's stripped down to nothing, allows himself to be humiliated, allows himself to be tortured like the worst criminal, like the worst prisoner, and then ultimately allows himself to be executed in place of the prisoners.

And what that means is that those who were once in chains, the chains come off and they're invited to come in and share in the glory and share in the honor and share in the privilege that Jesus enjoys in the throne room of heaven.

Countercultural ministry is only possible because of the countercultural truth of the gospel itself. And a gospel-centered ministry is therefore going to be, by definition, a countercultural ministry.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we know we need more than to hear it. Lord, we need you to work in us as we've said over and over and over this morning.

So I pray that as we come to you in prayer, as we come to you in worship, in singing, as we come to you around your table, I pray that you would do in us what we cannot accomplish on our own.

[30 : 55] And that is to show us the freedom that can be found by following you, to remind us of the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Awaken us to the Spirit. And then, Lord, to remind us that only you can change lives. And I pray that we would lay our lives down to be changed, to be transformed.

That as we will take this bread and bless it and break it and give it out, that you would take us and bless us and break us and give us to the world. That we might bring glory to you, Lord. And it's in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray.

Amen. . you