

Imperfect Church, Perfect Saviour: Christian Glamour

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 September 2024

Preacher: Kirk van der Swaagh

[0 : 00] there's a global network of churches that has become popular in the last several decades, and there's one of them in New York City. And about four years ago, its pastor was fired.

He was fired due to leadership abuse and moral failure, namely adultery. Now, the man who was fired was known as a celebrity pastor. His church would qualify as a megachurch, and he developed a following partly due to his presentation. Tattooed, designer jeans, expensive trainers, everything that says, I'm not your grandma's pastor. And the fact that he was in New York City and had baptized a few celebrities and befriended others added to his allure and got him interviews on the vast cultural wasteland that is morning television in the United States.

One stop, one popular program he was on was called The View. And there was another one that he was on, and it was hosted then by the reigning priestess of morning television, Oprah Winfrey.

When he came up in discussions with some of my fellow colleagues in New York, one of them had said, well, you know, I've listened to some of his sermons, and he preaches the gospel. Well, that may have been true, but even prior to his moral failing, I would suggest the message was compromised. Compromised by the man and his proclivity for fame. You know, I thought of him as I was mulling over this passage for tonight's sermon. Now, in particular, there was one practice that he had in this church that some folks in Corinth would likely have thought was a good idea. In the New York City church, as I said, would qualify as a mega church by most standards. And that kind of popularity would certainly draw people anyway. But given the presence of celebrities among the congregation, it would certainly have drawn even more. And what this pastor had done was to reserve a row of seats close to the front of the theater in which they were meeting and called it a VIP row. This was for celebrities who came, who would show up to this worship, and they would be ushered down to that row so that everybody in the theater could see who was in the house. Now, apparently, it wasn't something necessarily that the celebrities wanted, but something the pastor thought was good practice.

Now, in a city, in a city, most famous, that's most famous newspaper, the New York Times, every year offers accounts with pictures who showed up wearing what to the famous Metropolitan Museum of Art's annual gala, as well as pictures from the accounts of the Emmy Awards and the Tony Awards and the Oscar Awards. It makes sense. If you want to make it as a church in New York City, you roll out the red carpets for the celebrities who come to worship Jesus.

[3 : 05] Or does it? I think the Apostle Paul would have other ideas. We've come to the point in Paul's letter where he brings to a close his extended examination, teaching, admonition related to the factionalism that manifested itself in the Corinthian church.

Chapter 1, he said, what I mean is that each of you, one says, each one of you says, I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ. And as has been noted in previous sermons and alluded to in this chapter, it was Paul who, by God's grace, first brought the gospel to this diverse, bustling, and important city.

And as Campbell suggested in his sermon, in many ways, when Paul was in Corinth, it was a happy time for him. I mean, any preacher is encouraged when he sees fruit from his labors, and there had been a lot of fruit.

But in Paul's absence, the spiritual immaturity of many in the church has become evident. And the apostle will go on to address other ways in which their immaturity is manifesting itself.

But so far, in this letter, he's trying to rein in their love for prestige that has led to spiritual pride and ego-driven factionalism.

[4 : 30] He's trying to get them to see the true nature of the gospel and how contrary it is to the world's way of assigning worth. He explains that people like himself or Apollos or Peter, what they're doing is imparting, they are imparting the understanding how the thing's freely given to us by God, they're doing it in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

And why does he need to do this? Because, as he says, the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

And here's the indictment. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you're not ready, for you are still of the flesh. Now listen, being unlearned in the things of Christ as a new believer, being ignorant, possessing little knowledge, does not mean that your faith amounts to nothing.

Nothing could be further from the truth. If you possess saving faith, you do so by the grace of God, and it can grow. The problem in Corinth is that they think they already know all that they need to know.

[5 : 55] They've reached the pinnacle of spiritual wisdom, power, and experience. Yet Paul declares them, still be in the flesh. That is governed by the expectations, the preferences, the motivations of the world.

But they think they've already one foot through the pearly gates. What have they gotten wrong? Well, far from celebrity pastors with a coterie of groupies and designs to be known among the rich and the famous, Paul, Apollos, and Peter have been called to a very different kind of glamour.

The glamour of Christian service, which by the world's standards is anything but glamorous. And we'll consider this under three headings. The purpose of the apostle in God's plan, the place of the apostle in God's plan, and the power of the apostle in God's plan.

Verse 1 of chapter 4. Now he's talking to these who have been thinking badly about the role of people like Paul. This is how one should regard us, he says.

This is how one should regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Two words. Servants and stewards.

[7 : 17] There's lots of different words in the New Testament that can be translated as servants, but this particular one, this particular one within this context is interesting because it is also the term that Paul uses when he's standing before King Agrippa and talking about his experience of meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road.

Jesus saying to Paul at that moment, rise and stand upon your feet for I have appeared to you for this purpose to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things that you have seen that you in which you have seen me and those things of which I will appear to you.

He's been appointed as a servant by Jesus. It's the same word that he uses now in this language of 1 Corinthians chapter 4. So it's a servant that clearly understands that he's been appointed to serve the purposes of his master.

And he stood this and said this before King Agrippa and we'll talk about him later, but a man of prestige, a man of power, a man of glamour. The second word is stewards.

What's a steward? We often think of stewardship in terms of how we manage our money and are we good stewards? But in general, it really means that what we are doing is taking the resources granted to us and using them well.

[8 : 45] That is, using them in a way that brings pleasure to the one who granted us those things to use. Yeah, a servant, a steward is meant to give an account to the master who entrusted him with his wealth, with his property, with his children if he was a teacher for them.

So Paul understands himself then as one who is responsible to the owner of all that he has been entrusted with to Jesus. He called them to be a servant, called them to be a steward.

That's how they should be regarded. And what this means is that these believers in Corinth should be looking at these men as those who have been trusted with the gospel by God, with the purpose of bringing a return to the glory of the one who had entrusted it to them.

Do we have any evidence that the men Paul cites understood this about themselves? Well, let's consider Apollos. As Colin said, Apollos was considered the most famous preacher in the early church.

He was highly, highly regarded. But there's an account that sheds light on how Apollos understood his stewardship. You might remember this from Acts chapter 18. It says this, Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

[10 : 04] He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and he wrote to the disciples and welcomed him.

When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. Interesting. Here is Apollos, noted, described as he is described, and yet when two people come along and say, you know, you're a great preacher, but you need to understand something.

You're missing a very important part. He doesn't tell me anything. I know what I'm doing. I'm the hottest preacher in town. Well, he listens and he's gone to the end of the Jews, gives over, and he preaches and he continues to be effective.

He understood his stewardship, that he had been entrusted with something, and when suddenly he realized that something that he had been preaching was lacking and he was instructed, he took that instruction in.

[11 : 20] How about Peter? Remember when Peter had the experience of going into the household or Cornelius of the Gentile, and it raised really a lot of red flags for the Jewish believers back in Jerusalem, and they hear about it and they want to hear from what's going on, and so he explains how he was led by God through a dream to go to this household, and then eventually what he does is he has to stand up before these men and explain to them why it was that he had to do what he was called to do.

Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying you went to the uncircumcised men and ate with them, but Peter began and explained to them in order all that had happened, and then he says this, as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning, and I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

If then God gave them the same gift as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way? See, Peter understood his stewardship.

He had been entrusted with something, and here was God leading him, and if he's going to be preaching to Gentiles, and the Gentiles receive that same gift, what's he going to do? No, I can't do that anymore because I throw all their Gentiles.

But no, he understood that he had a responsibility to the gospel, and of course Paul. Paul says in Romans, I'm under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, so I'm eager to preach the gospel to you also in Rome.

[12 : 53] Paul understood the nature of stewardship, even as we considered last Sunday evening. He says, if anyone builds on the foundation, that is the foundation he has laid of Christ, if anyone builds with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest, for the day will disclose it because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

And doesn't that sound like the parable of the talents, right, when Jesus says, you know, that the owner gave a certain amount to one, a certain amount to another, and a certain amount to another, and he brings them to account, he says, give an account of what I entrusted with you.

Well, that indeed, Paul understands that he is a steward of the mysteries of God. So the purpose that God had for Paul and his colleagues was that they would be servants and stewards of the mysteries of God, and this meant that they were to bring the kind of return that the master was looking for.

And as such, then, it was to the master that Paul understood that he is accountable, not to those in Corinth who are ready to stand in judgment over him. He says, it's required of the stewards to be found faithful, but it's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.

I don't even judge myself. I don't think there's anything wrong, but ultimately, God is the one who's going to judge me. That's the place, the purpose of a steward.

[14 : 18] See, the purpose that God had for Paul and his colleagues was that they would be servants and stewards of the mysteries of God, and they were to be faithful to that purpose. It didn't matter if he had a big crowd of adherents.

At least it didn't matter to his ego. What was important was that the gospel was preached and preached faithfully. You know, that show, Downton Abbey, was that as big of a hit over here as it was over in the U.S.?

Well, Downton Abbey or any host of those things where they show these people in their black tie and their tails and they're dressed for dinner and they're sitting around a table in a silver shining candelabra and they're chatting away, flirting with one another, talking about politics, talking about military conquest, whatever they're talking about.

In the meantime, all the servants are standing around the edge of the room just waiting to take a plate away, put another plate down, fill a goblet with wine, fill it up again with wine, just waiting.

That's what Paul is. Paul's a servant on the outside of the room. He understands that it's his job to serve the one who's sitting at the table.

[15 : 28] Peter Morrison shared with me after Colin's sermon last week, talked about a sermon that he remembered some 60 years ago that was entitled The Lord's Messenger and The Lord's Message and it had three points all beginning with F.

That the Lord's Messenger is fashioned and the Lord's Messenger is fashioned by its truth, fragrant from its touch and forgotten in the telling. Now, that's Paul.

Paul just wants to be that servant in the back. You know, the worst thing that happens in that scene in Downton Abbey or any of them is when the servant comes and drops something, spills wine all over the white coat, the beautiful lace dress and oh, just the horror of it.

But that's what Paul understood what his purpose was. And that brings us to the next heading, the place of the apostle in God's plan. See, this part of the passage just starts in verse 8.

This part of the passage begins with what I said early that some in the church were acting as if they have already learned all that they need to learn. That they've achieved a spiritual superiority that deserves the kind of deference reserved for kings and queens.

[16 : 44] And Paul treats them with some searing sarcasm. Already, you have all you want. Already, you have become rich. Without us, you've become kings.

And would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you. Again, you'll think of those gathered around the table with a sumptuous meal before them. And should the master of the house desire something, all he does is lift his hand and the servant comes rushing to the side.

So Paul says, oh, that we would really be the case that you were like kings, that we would be, that you were first and foremost, possessor of authority and able to just snap your fingers and have people come to you.

And if that were the case, maybe Paul and his fellow preacher should just pull up a throne and sit down beside them. But that's not the place of an apostle in God's plan. Such glamour is not for Paul and his colleagues.

No gilded thrones, no preeminence, no snapping of fingers for servants to do their bidding. Paul goes on to offer language designed, should the Corinthians actually have the spiritual maturity to understand that, to bring them to their senses, to admonish them to leave off asserting their loyalties to particular preachers in an effort to booster their reputation in the community.

[18 : 00] Nothing could be so profoundly misguided. What does he say in verse 9? I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death.

This is likely an allusion to the Roman triumphal procession in which captured enemy soldiers were paraded through the streets before being executed. Or possibly, he's thinking also, the gladiators condemned to die in the arena.

But the kind of parading that Paul is talking about is not just before the cheering in the arena or the public square, but before the cosmos. Because we become expectable to the world, to the cosmos, to angels, and to men.

Now listen to the contrast that he makes between the Corinthians, church's self-estimation, and the world's estimation of the apostles. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ.

We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour, we hunger and thirst. We are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands.

[19 : 07] When reviled, we bless. When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat. We become and are still like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. That's the place of the apostle in God's plan.

There's no VIP row in the apostle for the apostle in the church of Jesus Christ. There's no carefully curated outfits with meticulously torn jeans and Gucci trainers.

No such glamour, while prized by the Corinthian church, is not the glamour of the one who has been entrusted with the mysteries of God. Paul is hungry, thirsty, poorly dressed, buffeted and homeless.

He is no celebrity pastor. He's the scum of the earth. He's not invited to major talk shows or to hear how cool and interesting he is. He's reviled, persecuted, and slandered.

He's not put forward by God as an example of worldly achievement. Rather, he is exhibited by God as the last of all. Like one sentenced for death, he and his colleagues have become the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

[20 : 14] And yet his response is to bless those who revile, endure under persecution, to entreat, to be solicitous when slandered. That's Christian glamour.

That's the glamour of the cross. It's the glamour of the one who left the glory of the throne room of heaven to receive a crown of thorns and assume his place on a blood-soaked throne of shame.

He was persecuted, but he endured. When he was reviled, he didn't revile back. When slandered, he entreated his father that they be forgiven. How far from the glamorous notions of the Corinthians is the place of the apostle in God's plan?

And what of the power of the apostle in God's plan? Well, hearing the way that Paul describes himself as those similarly called to the stewardship of the mysteries of God, one might think that he lacked the authority, the cultural cachet, the power to challenge these misguided believers.

They would likely only respect one who was eloquent, successful, well-schooled in the current cultural commitments that would make them relevant, make them attractive. But his power, his authority to challenge and expect obedience comes from that which he had been entrusted, the mysteries of God.

[21 : 40] What does he say in verses 14 to 15? I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers.

For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Be imitators of me. There is the power of the apostle to preach the cross, to preach the cross so that faith would be engendered in the hearts of sinners.

You know, back in 6 and 7, he says that he has spoken as he has for the benefit of the Corinthians. That they might learn by us not to go beyond what is written.

That none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. And what was written? Leading up to this passage, he has quoted the Old Testament five times and all verses that relate to what he has been seeking to correct.

From Isaiah 29, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. From Jeremiah 9, let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. From Isaiah 64, what no eye has seen nor ear heard nor heart imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.

[22 : 55] From Job 5, he catches the wise in their craftiness. From Psalm 94, the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise that they are futile. See, there's just no cause, Paul is saying, to be puffed up, thinking that allegiance to certain teachers marks one out as smarter than others, as wiser than others, as superior to others.

There's no place for such pride and arrogance. Anything we have is all due to the grace of God. That's what he says in verse 7. Who sees anything different in you?

What do you have that you did not receive? If then you did receive it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? Now, to acknowledge that we have nothing of which to boast is not the same thing as saying that there isn't anything good in us.

Yet meditating on Christ, studying the word of God, partaking of the means of grace, imitating Paul who imitated Christ, does produce good things in us. It will make us smarter.

It will make us wiser. It's just that we do not want to make the same mistake as our brothers and sisters in Corinth, who let their growth go to their head, thinking more highly of themselves than they ought to have thought.

[24 : 14] If you were here early, I had asked for some slides to go through with various quotes on humility. And I'm going to ask that the one from Charles Hobbess, the Hodge, come up again. Christian humility does not consist in denying what there is of good in us, but in an abiding sense of our desert.

That is, you don't deserve it. And in the consciousness that what we have of good is due to the grace of God. That's what the Corinthians needed to understand.

That's what Paul was encouraging them to see. That all that they had received from a Paul or a Paulus or a Peter, all that they had received in understanding of the things of God are things that have come to them out of grace.

They had no place to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. Paul's power rested not in his rhetorical skill, his good looks, his mesmerizing preaching, his ability to mix it up with the celebrities, his power rested in what he said earlier, the preaching of Christ and him crucified.

When I came to you, brothers, I came not proclaiming you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.

[25 : 33] And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom but in demonstration of the spirit and power so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul says in verse 15, For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Be imitators of me. What's interesting is, you know, I alluded to that testimony of Paul before King Agrippa when he uses that same term that Jesus used on the road to Damascus.

And in that same defense that Paul has to King Agrippa, he says this, Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

That's his stewardship. That's his being faithful to what he'd been appointed to do. And it goes on, he says, And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you are out of your mind.

[26 : 52] Your great learning is driving you out of your mind. And Paul said, I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows these things and to him I speak boldly.

For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped this notice for this has not been done in a corner, King Agrippa. Do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe. And Agrippa said to Paul, In a short time you have perceived me to be a Christian.

And Paul said, Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but everybody who hears me this day might become such as I am except for these chains. What does he say to those in Corinth?

Imitate me. Can you imagine Paul coming from the back of the theater, walking up the aisle, going past the VIP row, climbing up on the stage, standing next to the celebrity pastor.

Reverberations of the praise band still felt in the room. Smoke was still clearing from the effects from their last set. His clothes, a little Fred Bear, perhaps he's a little gaunt, worn from physical hardship, lack of food, maybe even unshaven, in need of a shower because he's been on the road for the last couple of days.

[28 : 12] He turns, he faces the room of a few thousand people, holds up his hands, and says, I urge you, be imitators of me.

how profoundly unglamorous, how uncool, how unsexy. And yet, for those who are called and spiritually mature, the wisdom of God and the power of God.

can ■ lads or imagine in he