

Still Imperfect Church; Still Perfect Saviour (6)

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- [0 : 0 0] Jesus, still imperfect church, still perfect Savior.! I have many titles.
- ! Mr. Dow, Reverend Dow, Dr.! Dr. Dow, the Reverend Dr. Dow, and even Dow Boy, to my friends.
- ! But by far the most precious title is Dad. Now, of course, that's a title reserved for just a few of you. I wouldn't welcome anyone calling me Dad who wasn't one of my children, but for me, Dad is actually my favorite title.
- It would seem from the Gospels that the Son of Man was Jesus' favorite title. From 1 Corinthians 3, verse 9, backed up by 2 Corinthians 6, verse 1, we learn of one of the Apostle Paul's favorite titles for himself, God's Fellow Worker.
- God's Fellow Worker. It's not just a title, is it? It's a description of what's most important to Paul. The thought that by his words and actions, the God of all grace and hope was working in and through him was, for Paul, the greatest privilege in his life.
- [1 : 3 1] It wasn't easy to be God's Fellow Worker. It cost Paul much, but no more than it cost God himself to send his Son to the cross for us.
- For Paul, one of the features, if not the major feature, of being God's Fellow Worker was that God spoke through him to his beloved churches.
- For example, in 2 Corinthians 5, 20, we saw this two weeks ago, Paul writes, Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. As the Apostle was making an appeal for people to come to Christ, God was holding out his hand, inviting, urging, and commanding people to come to him in faith and trust.
- This is what it meant for Paul to be God's Fellow Worker, to appeal to the people of God on behalf of God.
- Well, having begun chapter 6 with the words, Working together with him, that is with God, Paul now makes three appeals to the Christians in Corinth.
- [2 : 4 3] Three appeals. Three gracious invitations as God's ambassador. Three commands from God. An appeal to receive, verses 1 and 2.
- An appeal to understand, verses 3 through 10. And an appeal to love, verses 11 through 13. Just because none of us are apostles, like Paul was, we can still be God's fellow workers, even as we make these appeals to each other as Christians.
- So, first of all then, an appeal to receive. An appeal to receive, verses 1 and 2. Working together with him, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain, for he says, in a favorable time, and so on.
- Upon a lampstand in Victoria Park, I'll give you a sweetie if you can find it for me next time you're in Victoria Park. Just to the west of our church building here are painted the words, Now is the day of salvation.
- Most often, these words, now is the day of salvation, are used to press home the urgency of being reconciled to God, of having faith in Jesus, of becoming a Christian.

[4 : 02] In the same way that pushy salesman on Black Friday will tell you that this amazing deal he's showing you will only be available for one more hour, So, these verses are used as urgent evangelistic calls.

Now, I think these words can be used in that way, but I don't think that's their primary meaning. Paul begins, We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

In other words, he's speaking to Christians who have already received the grace of Christ. These aren't unbelievers being pressed to become Christians. These are Christians being encouraged to make the most of the grace God has given them in Christ.

God's given us an amazing gift. Now he's urging us to make the most of it. In the immediately preceding verse, verse 21, Paul writes, And as we saw two weeks ago, on the cross, a great exchange was taking place.

Our sins were being accounted to Jesus. They were being placed on his shoulders, and he was being cursed for them. His righteousness was being accounted to us.

[5 : 31] It was being placed on our shoulders, and we have been blessed for it. We call this great exchange justification. The death of Christ has not merely served to take away our sins.

It has made us entirely as righteous as Jesus is in the sight of God. This is the grace of God. That we who once were far off from God have, through Christ, been reconciled to Him.

That we who once were dead in our sin have, through Christ, been declared as righteous as Christ is in the sight of God. Through faith in Jesus, that is what every Christian has received.

And it's not a gift that God will ever take back from us. When Paul talks about receiving the grace of God in vain, he's not raising the possibility that a genuine Christian can ever lose their salvation.

In that case, then it's not just that the Christian has received the grace of God in vain, but that the death of Christ for that Christian was in vain.

[6 : 40] And that's not possible. The grace we've received from God is that we have been declared as righteous in the eyes of God as Jesus is.

Isn't that amazing? We have been declared in the sight of God as righteous as Jesus is. To receive that grace in vain would be to not build upon that.

To not build upon that. It would be to remain an immature, unsanctified Christian, to be declared righteous before God, but not to grow in practical righteousness.

Or to live in a righteous way. God's help is available to us. He will listen to our prayers to help us to grow in righteousness, to progressively become more holy and more like Jesus in our day-to-day lives.

To make full use of the grace of God means not just to be righteous in principle, but to become righteous in practice.

[7 : 49] So, we've all been shocked and saddened by the announcement of Prince Andrew's former sins. He was a British prince, but clearly he didn't act like a British prince.

He may have been a prince in principle, but not in practice. And now rightly, I believe, he's been stripped of his royal title. He is no longer a British prince, either in principle or in practice.

To receive the grace of God in vain is to be a Christian in principle, but not to live like a Christian in practice. The Christian who is living in and growing in their faith in Jesus is making the most of the grace of God.

We've been given a gift. Now, make the most of it. At Christmas, many of us will receive gifts and we'll be grateful for them. Some of these gifts we'll use on Christmas Day or perhaps for the following week, but then they'll spend the rest of the year unused at the back of a cupboard somewhere.

Will we do the same with the grace of God in salvation? Will we make the most of the Bible God has opened our eyes and hearts to? The church into which God has placed us?

[9 : 10] The gift of prayer God has given us? The time God has blessed us with? The opportunities to share our faith He gives us?

The chance to grow in our faith He gives us? Paul's appealing to us to make the most of the grace of God, to live out and grow in our faith in the peace Christ has made for us with God and the righteousness Jesus Christ has given us through faith.

As God's fellow worker, He's appealing to us, as if God Himself is inviting us. Will we listen to and take to heart His appeal to make the most of the grace of God?

So, an appeal. Secondly, an appeal to understand, verses 3 through 10. An appeal to understand. These Corinthian Christians, although they had implemented many of Paul's instructions to them in the former letter of 1 Corinthians, were still being deceived by false teachers.

After all, these false teachers were very impressive speakers. They had charismatic personalities. They were attractive figures. Paul insists that he was God's fellow worker.

[10 : 33] And as he calls himself in verse 4, a servant of God. But compared to these so-called super-apostles, what did Paul have to commend himself to the Corinthian Christians?

Why should they listen to him? After all, the super-apostles were far better preachers than he ever was. What are the marks of a genuine servant of God?

What are the marks of a true fellow worker with God? Well, between verses 3 and 10, we have a description of Paul's life and ministry, a picture strip, as it were, describing what it looks like to be a genuine fellow worker of God.

Whenever you see these characteristics in a Christian minister, you can be sure he's the real deal, a man who can be trusted until he was speaking from God. You can be sure of it because these descriptions belong to him only because they first belonged to his master, Jesus.

All of these pictures were painted of Jesus, the Jesus who suffered for us, the Jesus who lived for us, the Jesus who died for us. Paul looked like his master, Jesus.

[11 : 44] And we must all be who strive to be God's fellow workers. Remember what we said a couple of sermons ago? A crucified Christ must be preached in a crucified style by a crucified man.

Well, this list from between verses 3 and 10 can be divided into three sections, the whole dividing the genuine servant of Christ. Pain, piety, and paradox.

Pain, piety, and paradox. Paul would let us say in 2 Timothy 3.12, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

And indeed, if that's true of all Christians, that godliness leads to persecution, it's especially true for God's fellow workers. Pain, piety, and paradox.

First of all, Paul commends himself in the pain of his ministry. Remember here, he's comparing himself to the super apostles, these false teachers, impressive personalities, charismatic, attractive.

[12 : 57] Verses 4 and 5 read like a horror story. Everything we as human beings want to run away from. Great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger.

Sounds a bit like having a child. The story of Paul and Acts reads like a racy story. So exciting as you read through the book of Acts, reading about all the things that Paul did.

Gave an inspiration to the romance of missionary endeavor, but the reality was very different. Few servants of Christ has ever suffered as much as Paul did. We could speak of each one of these, but let's just take one of the words in verse, end of verse 4, the word calamities.

Calamities. It's a wonderful word which literally means narrowness, narrowness. It's used in the Old Testament to describe a city which has been besieged.

You know, at one point or another, I'm sure we've all experienced claustrophobia, the fear of enclosed spaces. We feel trapped and squeezed. We feel as if we're being pressed in on every side.

[14 : 05] As time went on, this word came to mean a set of stressful circumstances. Distress, anguish, trouble.

Physically, spiritually, mentally, there were often times in the Apostle Paul's life when he felt claustrophobic. Narrowed in and squeezed tight.

He was beaten and stoned and left for dead. There seemed to be no way out. Remember what David said in Psalm 31, I hear the whispering of many, terror on every side, as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

Calamities indeed. Calamities which confront every genuine Christian ministry. If there are any here this evening who are contemplating Christian ministry, I don't want to dissuade you, but I want you to know that ministry is full of calamities.

It is to be expected. We should not be surprised at the narrowness, which sometimes seems to come from nowhere, but what brings great anguish.

[15 : 26] Secondly, remember, Paul is campaigning himself to these super apostles, these impressive speakers, these charismatic auditors, great leaders. He commends himself in verses 6 and 7 in the piety of his life.

In the piety of his life. These verses, verses 6 and 7, read like a summary of the life of our Lord. Purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, the power of God with weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left.

If the first section was devoted to the calamities the Christian minister must expect to face, the second's devoted to his character. The two are linked, you see.

Through the whole of the New Testament, the sufferings of the Christian lead to the formation of a Christ-like character. So, God's fellow worker may ask himself, why are all these painful things happening to me?

What have I done wrong to deserve all these things? And the answer may be, well, nothing. You've done nothing wrong. This is God's way of making you more like Jesus.

[16 : 33] You may have done nothing wrong. This is God's way of making you more like Jesus. You are being crucified so that you may preach a crucified Christ in a crucified style.

It's all about character. We all want to be like Jesus, do we not? But to be like Jesus means we have to deny ourselves and take up our crosses. We must be willing to suffer with Him and for Him.

Ultimately, character is the trump card in the genuineness of a minister's service for Christ. Now, these false teachers in Corinth, oh, they talked a good game, but they didn't walk in purity and knowledge and patience and so on.

You know, we all hate hypocrisy. But in many ways, it is easier to be a hypocrite in the ministry than anywhere else. It's easier to be a hypocrite in the ministry than anywhere else.

So, therefore, character development more than anything else is to be the primary goal of the minister of Christ, the fellow worker of God. And again, that's why Paul later on in his life in 2 Timothy 4 writes to Timothy, keep a close watch on yourself.

[17 : 48] Because when a man is in public, that is what he must be in private. When a man is in private, that is what he must be in public. This is the mark of genuineness. And then thirdly, remembering that he's comparing himself and commending himself on the basis of these things as opposed to the false teachers.

In verses 8 and 9, he commends himself in the life of paradox, through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise, treated as imposters and yet true as unknown and so on. Again, how much like our Lord, of whom all these opposites were true.

The Jesus who was honored and dishonored, the Jesus who was slandered and praised, the Jesus and so on. The paradox of these verses resolves down into this.

From a worldly perspective, Paul was dishonored, slandered, treated as an imposter, unknown, dying and so on. But from God's perspective, Paul was honored, praised, true, well-known, living and so on.

The question that Paul had to ask himself was this, which perspective is the most important? The world's or God's?

[19 : 02] Was it more important what the world thought of him? Yes, even the church. Or was it more important what God thought of him? The paradox of ministry is precisely this, that the division between a worldly and a heavenly perspective and seldom do the two agree.

The Christian minister must make a choice. Shall he appeal for the popularity of the world around him, yes, even the church? Or shall his first appeal be to the grace and favor of God?

The great German reformer, Martin Luther, made that choice when at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he famously said, here I stand. I can do no other.

Help me, God. It was said of the early church father Athanasius, we looked at him by the Nicene Creed, that at one point the whole world was against him and the church.

And so the phrase was born, Athanasius contramundum, Athanasius versus the world. Pain, piety, paradox.

[20 : 15] I was at a ministerial induction recently where the distinguishing marks of Christian leadership ministry were being highlighted. Regrettably, at no stage in the sermon were any of these three commendations mentioned.

Pain, piety, paradox. Rather, what was being highlighted was, were management, vision casting, and strategy.

These were the characteristics of the false teachers in Corinth. What commended Paul as a true servant of Christ, as following Christ's footsteps, and as God's fellow worker, were the exact opposite.

Paul did not exude professionalism, but pain, not competence, but character, not popularity, but paradox. paradox. If we want to put no obstacles in anyone's way to becoming and being Christians, if we want a faultless ministry, we need to pursue Paul's Christ-like ministry of self-sacrifice.

Remember what Jim Packer called it? Weakness is the way. We need as Christians to understand and see these things clearly. As I said two weeks ago, never trust a minister who doesn't walk without a limp.

[21 : 34] Wounded healers make the best healers. Crucified men are those best equipped to preach a crucified Christ in a crucified style. This is what it means to have the most favored title of God's fellow worker.

Again, I'm not trying to dissuade any young man from going into the ministry. I'm just telling you this is what it's like. Thirdly, and finally, from verse 11 to 13, an appeal to love, an appeal to love.

The greatest doctrine of the Bible is God is love. God is love. Everything God does is motivated and characterized by love.

He sent His Son to die on the cross because He loves us. If we want that distinguishing title, God's fellow worker, we must too be motivated and characterized by the love of God.

Later, the Apostle John in 1 John 3.16 writes, By this we know love, that Christ laid down His life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

[22 : 50] As God's fellow worker, Paul's life was characterized by this. He did just that. He laid down His life for other Christians.

So, in verse 11, he writes these words. He says, We've spoken freely to you, Corinthians. Our heart is wide open. Of course, He's had to say hard things to them, but far be it being because He hated them, it's because He loved them.

Sometimes, we have to say hard things to each other, but it's not because, not because we hate each other, it's because we love each other. Sometimes, we have to say hard things to our children because we love them.

We want the best for them. Just as our hearts are wide open to our children, so, the fellow worker of God must have his or her heart wide open to those he or she serves.

That's one of the hazards of ministry, that's one of the things which makes it so very painful because opening our hearts to one another leaves us vulnerable to being hurt. Opening our hearts to one another leaves us vulnerable to being hurt.

[23 : 56] If we close off our hearts and don't allow ourselves to love anyone or anyone to love us, we will never be hurt. But this is what Christ did.

He opened his heart and became vulnerable and this is what we must do, to walk the path of vulnerability by opening our hearts to one another in love. I don't think the ESV does justice to the last two verses, so I'm going to read read these verses from the New International Version as I call it, the nearly infallible version.

We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding it from us. As a fair exchange, I speak as to my children, open wide your hearts also.

We are not withholding our affection from you, but you're withholding yours from us. When I was a boy, I'm sure some of you did this as well, I used to sing the children's chorus, I'm in the Lord's army.

Yes, sir. There's a sense in which that's true, is it not? We're in the Lord's army, but there's a greater sense in which it's rubbish, a lot of rubbish. God's fellow workers, ministers in the gospel, are not parade ground sergeants commanding and forcing us to do things against our will.

[25 : 13] Paul was not like that. He appealed to love and relationship. Why should the Corinthian Christians receive the grace of God and make the most of it by becoming what in practice what they are in principle?

Why should they understand that the marks of a genuine fellow worker of God are pain, piety, and paradox? Not because they've been forced or brainwashed by a spectacular speaker or a charismatic cult leader, but because they realize how much Paul loves them and wants what's best for them.

He wants them to be spiritually mature. He wants them to enjoy the fullness of God in their hearts. You know, I never liked being at the harsh end of receiving the end of harsh words from my parents, but I knew that because they loved me and they only wanted what was best for me, well, I did what I was told.

Most of the time. To follow in Christ's footsteps is to leave those you serve in no doubt that for all your personal faults, and listen, every single minister I know has got serious personal faults, you love them.

You love those you serve. That your heart's wide open to those you serve. And that opens the door then to reciprocity. That despite all your faults, and they are many, they may love you also, and that through mutual love there may be a growing in faith and Christian maturity.

[26 : 47] That's why Paul appeals to these Corinthians to open wide their hearts to him. He wants them to love him even as he loves them, because then and then only will the fullness of the benefit of his apostolic influence be felt among them.

And then and then only will they realize how wrong they had been to allow themselves to be deceived by these hacksters, these false teachers, these impressive speakers. You know, there can be few higher titles bestowed upon a human being than to be called God's fellow worker.

It is hard to believe. It's hard to believe that Paul, who was formerly called Saul, could call himself that. Remember? He once tried to destroy the church, and with all his heart, he hated Jesus and the message of the gospel.

But the grace of God changed his life. That's what God and the power of his grace can do. He can transform us from being his enemies to becoming his fellow workers.

To go back to the very beginning, God is inviting us, he's beckoning us, and commanding us to be reconciled to him through faith in Jesus. Because, you know, there is a greater title than the title God's fellow worker.

[28 : 06] There is a greater title than the title God's fellow worker. And that title is Christian. It's a greater title altogether. That more than dad or mom or minister or God's fellow worker.

That's the greatest of all privileges to be known as a Christian. As ambassadors of Christ, we urge you not to delay.

Now is the appointed time. Now is the day of salvation. Be known as a Christian. Put your faith in Jesus. Amen.