

Design, Desire, Defence

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 and from verse 11.

I have been a fool. You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super apostles, even though I am nothing.

The signs of a true apostle. Could someone read this passage for me? Would you mind coming and reading this passage for me, Gordon, just for a second? Is that okay? Thanks.

Yeah. Yeah. I need to go with something more. Just from verse 11. I have been a fool.

You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super apostles, even though I am nothing.

[1 : 22] The signs of the true apostle. The signs of the true apostle were performed amongst you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. For in what you were less favored than the rest of the churches, except I myself did not burden you.

Forgive me for the third time. Forgive me for the third time. I am ready to come to you. I am ready to come to you. And I will try not to be a burden, because I seek not what is yours, but you.

For children are not bound to save up for the parents, but parents for the children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.

If I love you more, am I to be loved less? But granted, granted that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit.

Did I take advantage of you through any of these whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you?

[2 : 28] Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps? Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking from Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved.

For I fear that perhaps when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish. That perhaps there will be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and that I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier, and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practised.

Thank you, Gordon. Cruising is a term ministers use to describe a situation where a minister's more or less given up, and he's running on autopilot.

He's punch drunk. He's going through the motions of ministry rather than putting his full energy into what God has called him to do, cruising. Now, there may be many reasons why a minister gets into cruise mode, most of which are actually pretty valid, but none of which means it needs to be permanent.

[4 : 07] Perhaps he's had disappointments in his personal life or his congregation. Perhaps he's passing through a time of personal illness. He just needs time to recover. Whatever the reason, for a while he's running on autopilot.

He's cruising. He's lost his drive, and he's just going through the motions of ministry without really having the heart for ministry. The thing is, the Apostle Paul never seems to have gone into a cruise mode in his ministry.

Despite all he had to endure, both in his personal life and the disappointments he suffered in ministry, he never seems to have lost his drive.

He always seems to have been highly motivated, full of energy. Now, we're not all Pauls, and we all need to be aware of our limitations, but his example is an inspiration to all of us.

Whether in the ministry or more fundamentally, actually, in the Christian life as a whole, we want to break out of any kind of cruise mode we've got ourselves into, our attitude of going through the motions of being a Christian, and regain our desire for the Christian life and the Christian ministry. [5 : 24] Well, in these verses, 2 Corinthians 12, verses 11 through 21, the Apostle Paul, having exposed himself as weak, wholly dependent upon Christ's grace, as we saw last Sunday evening, he describes what it looks like to break out of the cruise mode and take control of our Christian lives once more.

He talks of three things. First of all, the pastor's design, verses 11 through 13, the pastor's desire, verses 14 through 18, and the pastor's defense, verses 19 through 21.

I wonder, are you in cruise mode in your Christian life and in your service for Jesus? Are you in cruise mode? Just going through the motions.

Tonight's your opportunity to break out and recommit yourself to your Lord. First of all, then, from verse 11 through 13, the pastor's design, the pastor's design.

Well, as you know, one of the problems of the church in Corinth was the presence of certain false teachers. In verse 11, Paul sarcastically calls them super apostles.

[6 : 42] Of course, by contrast, Paul is just a mere apostle. Paul is not the right reverend Paul. He's just the reverend Paul. Now, these super apostles were considered wise because they engaged deeply with Greek philosophy and were trained in classical auditory.

They were charismatic. They were impressive. They were everything you look for in a leader among men. When they spoke, they held you with their superior auditory.

However, these men didn't do their job for nothing. They expected to be paid for their services. Compared to them, Paul was a fool.

Paul was a fool. His speech was plain, and rather engaged with Greek philosophy, he stuck to the clear doctrines of the Christian faith, which to the ears of the worldly wise were naive, were foolish. Paul didn't look the part of an apostle. His body was scarred by the various sufferings he had had to endure. He wasn't an impressive figure.

[7 : 48] He was a small man. In all likelihood, he was going blind. He was a timid and rather fearful speaker. He didn't charge anything for his services.

They say that if you pay for something, you're more likely to value it. The Corinthians didn't value Paul as much as they should have done because they got him for free.

Now, Paul couldn't change his appearance, but some other things he did were by design. He didn't want to impress others with his personality or his auditory.

You see, he wanted to draw them to Jesus and the simplicity of the gospel. He didn't charge anything for his services so that he could not be accused of gaining anything at the expense of the Corinthians.

He sums it up in verse 11 as he says, I am nothing. I am nothing. You know, sometimes we have to make ourselves nothing in order to make Jesus everything.

[8 : 54] We need to get out of the way in order that Jesus may have the full focus. But what was by design were the things he had done when he ministered among them.

So he tells them of these things in verse 12. He says, The signs of a true apostle were performed among you. Not a super apostle, a true apostle. With utmost patience. With signs and wonders and mighty works.

And Paul's saying here, I've got nothing to prove. I was directly commissioned an apostle by the risen Christ. I don't need the approval of anyone else. But here we see what the design was when he served the Corinthians.

Signs, wonders, and mighty works. Signs, wonders, and mighty works. He says he's not interested in the frills and the falderals.

He's not interested at all in the appearance and the philosophy. His design was the demonstration of the power of God at work. He wanted his ministry among the Corinthians to be authentic and genuine, to have a lifelong, transforming impact upon them.

[10 : 11] He wanted the Holy Spirit to work among them. No pathetic human imitation. You see, it's very easy to stir up a frenzied crowd with passionate auditory and an atmosphere.

It's easy to give a crowd a good time to entertain them. We see it all the time from football matches to political rallies.

Yes, even intense religious meetings with thousands of people present. But for all the glitz and the glam, what's on show is not divine power changing lives.

It's human power, entertaining, giving people a good time. But what Paul was desperate to see among the people of Corinth was a genuine work of the Holy Spirit.

In his case, signs, wonders, and mighty works. There is no doubt that the early apostles of Christ possessed the ability to do these things in the earthly church.

[11:20] Signs, wonders, and mighty works. As pointers to the spoken word, and in the absence of a written Bible, God gave these apostles certain special gifts.

We don't believe that these gifts are now in normal operation, and yet, does it not remain the design, the purpose of a pastor to turn his back on human ways of influencing others, and to focus rather on the demonstration of the Holy Spirit and His power at work through Him to the salvation and growth of His hearers?

That remains his purpose, right? The gospel minister, by definition, demonstrates the authenticity and power of his ministry through the proclamation of the word of the gospel.

Listen again to what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 1 through 5. I think it was Campbell who preached from this passage last year. When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming 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 in much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith may not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

[12:55] Paul didn't look like a super apostle. Paul didn't have the charisma of a super apostle. Paul didn't sound like a super apostle. Paul didn't do the things a super apostle does.

And his message wasn't the same as that the super apostles preached. But for all that, his ministry among the Corinthians was a demonstration of the Spirit and his power purely because he confined what he said to the message of Christ and Him crucified.

A message which God has promised to bless. And his motive, his purpose, his design was that the faith of his listeners would rest not on him, his charisma, his leadership, his wisdom, but on the power of God.

Is this not the design, the purpose of the gospel minister? He longs to see the Holy Spirit working in power through the message he preaches of Christ and Him crucified.

And he longs for the faith of his listeners that it does not rest on him, but on the power of God. He wants to see genuine Christians not flash-in-the-pan converts.

[14:17] For the last few weeks, one of my Facebook friends, I don't have many Facebook friends, but one of my Facebook friends from the north has been posting a quote from the English preacher C.H. Spurgeon on her feed.

If ever a message was needed to be heard by the church today, it is this. Listen to this. Don't go when it's all fine music and grand talk and beautiful architecture.

Go where the gospel is preached and go often. Don't go when it's all fine music and grand talk and beautiful architecture. Go where the gospel is preached and go often.

There's nothing wrong with fine music. There's nothing wrong with grand talk. There's nothing wrong with beautiful architecture, but it all pales into nothingness compared to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it's here where Christ and Him crucified are proclaimed, the Spirit is at work in sovereign power. This is the pastor's design. God's not promised to bless fine talk and fine music and grand architecture. God has promised to bless gospel preaching, the preaching of Christ and Him crucified, the pastor's design. Second, the pastor's desire, verses 14 through 18. Paul was an outstanding intellect. Some say he was the greatest intellect of the modern Western world. For all that he lacked a background in Greek philosophy, his logic, his reason, his intelligence is beyond question. Some of his analyses and his arguments are beyond all contradiction. In the service of Christ, a great intellect can achieve much.

We are thankful for great intellects in the church of God, people like John Lennox, who have more intelligence in their pinky finger than most of us have in our entire brains.

[16:27] Now, Paul was a very intelligent man, but he never traded on his intelligence. Rather, in this passage, he emphasizes not his intelligence, but his affections, not his mind, but his heart.

The issue is the one that false apostles, the super apostles, are placing upon the Christians. That is the financial burden that the super apostles are placing upon the Christians, because they charge for their services. Now, perhaps that wouldn't be such a bad thing, but they were not only financially fleecing the Corinthians, they are spiritually cheating them also, giving them philosophical fluff rather than the gospel of Christ and crucified. By contrast, Paul had been preaching the truth, but charging the Corinthians nothing. He doesn't want to be a burden to them. He doesn't want to take advantage of them. This is where we see the desires of Paul's heart demonstrated. In verse 14, he writes, I seek not what is yours, but you. When it comes to pastoral ministry, surely this is the desire of every faithful gospel minister. I'm not interested in what is yours. I'm seeking only you. It's the desire of the faithful shepherd because it's the desire of the great shepherd, Jesus Christ. His interest is not in what we can give him or what we can do for him or even how he may use us in his service. Christ's interest is in us. We can give Jesus our gold, but keep our hearts back from him.

We can give Christ our gifts, but keep our hearts back from him. We can even give Christ our lives, but hold our hearts back from him. We can give everything in his service, but all the time forget that he does not need what we give him. He wants us. I married my wife not for what she could give me. I married her for her. And the more we go on as a married couple, the more we realize that what's important to us is not what we have, but that we have each other. And in the same way Paul says, I seek not what is yours, I seek you. He's not interested in what they can give him, be that security, money, status, reputation. He's not interested in being served by them.

[19 : 28] He only wants to serve them. He goes on and says in verse 14, he says, I will most gladly be, I'll most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. We could paraphrase this as saying, I will most gladly be destroyed for you. I will most gladly be worn out for you.

Now, is that not a litany of the sufferings of Paul in 2 Corinthians 11? Is this not a list of the ways in which Paul had spent himself and been spent, been worn out, been destroyed on behalf of those God had called him to minister to in Corinth? Whatever way you look at it, ministry to the Corinthians has cost Paul more than he could have afforded to pay, but he was willing to be spent for them. He was willing to spend troubled nights of sleepless anxiety on their behalf.

And he wasn't interested in being paid by them in any way. He wasn't interested in anything they could give him. What he wanted was them. Well, as we read in verse 15, their souls.

He didn't desire what they could give him. He desired what he could give them, the gospel. Ministry is not about what you can get. It's about what you can give. It's not about programs. It's about people. It's about people's response to the gospel and about their growth in grace.

Could any vocation be as noble as that which gives itself for others? Paul sacrificed it all so that the Corinthians could be forgiven and have eternal life in Christ.

[21 : 13] And then he opens his heart up in verse 15 and says, if I love you more, am I to be loved less? People tend not to appreciate things when they don't have to pay for them. Well, that's what they say.

But I never paid for the love of my wife. And I never paid for the love of my parents or the love of my children. These are the things I value most in this world. These are the things I'd most readily suffer for. How ungrateful I would be if I abused the love of those who loved me most, if I took it for granted and didn't love them in return. This is what the Corinthians were doing.

Paul couldn't have loved them any more than he did. He was suffering for them more and spending himself more for them. In Galatians 2.20, Paul writes what is perhaps the most powerful gospel phrase in all scripture, the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. Those who follow Christ's footsteps must love those they serve and give themselves for them. If our motives are anything other than seeking the good of souls of people, then full-time ministry or mission is not for us.

I can think of no better example of this than the 17th century Scottish minister Samuel Rutherford, after whom Samuel's named. For many years, he was minister of a tiny little church in a tiny little place called Anwath in Dumfrieshire Galloway, near the Solway coast.

After his death, drawn together from his letters, a Christian hymn writer called Anne Ross Cousins wrote these words taken from his letters, which represents Rutherford's dedication to the people God had called him to minister to. And some of these words will be familiar to you from the hymn.

[23 : 15] Fair Anwath by the Solway, Now, there was a man who could say, I don't seek what's yours. I seek you.

The pastor's desire. And then thirdly, the pastor's defense, verses 19 through 21, the pastor's defense. It's a very daunting responsibility to be given spiritual oversight to be a minister. And that's especially true when there are divisions and disputes among those God has called you to serve. The pastor is often called upon to make unpopular decisions or to say unpopular things. Now, don't get me wrong, this doesn't often happen, but I've seen it breaking many otherwise good and fruitful ministries. The apostle Paul has already admitted to experiencing anxiety because of the pressure of oversight.

And some of that pressure upon ministers comes from having to defend themselves and the choices they make. Now, let me be clear. I do not believe in the model of a one-man ministry. [24 : 49] Do not believe in that for one second. In Presbyterianism, we hold to the plurality of elders, none of whom have any more power than anyone else.

Likewise, it is utterly wrong for a minister to hold himself unaccountable for what he says and what he does. He is a very foolish man who does not consult, listen to others. But ultimately, as a minister, he often stands alone. Just like Paul did in Corinth. Receiving criticism if he says yes. Receiving criticism if he says no.

Now, what's he to do in a situation like that when the choices he makes are going to be very unpopular? Well, he can get anxious, perhaps give in to the temptation to fear man and do the wrong thing, rather than fear God and do the right thing.

The question is to whom ultimately is the minister accountable? And to whom ultimately must he give a defense? As we've seen over the months and years, when Paul gets to Corinth, he is very fearful of encountering many difficult behaviors.

[26 : 05] Quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, conceit. And is fearful of having to mourn over the lack of repentance of those he had earlier rebuked.

And when he gets to Corinth, he knows he's going to have to say many hard and unpopular things. Well, unlike, of course, the false teachers, they never say anything harsh. They love to tickle people's ears and tell them how good they are.

If Paul was driven by the fear of man, the fear of being unpopular, he wouldn't say what he needed to bring the Corinthians to repentance and restore them to gospel faithfulness.

But as we read in verse 19, Paul's not driven by the fear of man. Paul feels no need to defend himself to the Corinthians.

Rather, he says, it is in the sight of God that we've been speaking in Christ and all for your upbuilding, beloved. Paul is not ultimately accountable to the Corinthians, but to God.

[27 : 19] And that's where his final defense lies. Not his popularity among people, but that he is speaking in Christ and in the sight of God. And he's speaking not in order to tear the Corinthians down, but to build them up.

Paul's ultimate accountability is to the shepherd of the sheep, not to the sheep. The shepherd is accountable to the owner of the sheep, not to the sheep he shepherds. And in the same way, when called to make unpopular choices and to say unpopular things, the minister must remember that his ultimate accountability is to Christ, the Lord of the church.

And it's that sense of ultimate accountability which on one hand keeps him faithful to the Bible and to God, but on the other hand, helps him to keep going even when he has to say or do difficult things.

The name of John Calvin, the French reformer, will always be associated with Geneva. But did you know that the Genevan church banished Calvin from their city because they felt his reforms had gone too far?

Calvin was deeply hurt and he left Geneva. And even when the Genevans begged him to return because they'd realized they'd made a mistake, he didn't want to go back.

[28 : 42] He was too hurt. It took Calvin's friend, William Farrell, to place Calvin under the threat of a divine curse to return to Geneva and make him go back and continue the work of reformation there.

Again, the name of Jonathan Edwards will always be associated with Northampton, New England. Whenever I'm in America, I remind the Americans that Jonathan Edwards was British, not American.

It was before the American War of Independence. I side with King Charles on these matters. So I say, one of Britain's greatest ever theologians, under Jonathan Edwards' ministry, revival broke out

in New England and tens of thousands of people were converted to Christ. But did you know that Edwards' congregation in Northampton kicked him out soon afterwards? They dissolved the pastoral tie with Edwards and threw him out in his ear, not because of any difference in doctrine, but just because they wanted to hear a new voice from the pulpit. Ministers being mistreated, Calvin in Geneva and Edwards from Northampton, it's not a new thing. Paul experienced it, as did Calvin, as did Edwards, countless others since, and many today. [30 : 12] But in times like this, the minister's ultimate defense isn't to a higher human or church court. It is to the God who called him to serve Christ in the first place.

There may be many legitimate reasons why for a while a minister goes into cruise mode. But it's never legitimate to go into cruise mode as a Christian. However, perhaps that's where some of us are this evening. We're not going forward in the faith. Perhaps we wouldn't say we're going back either. We're just static. We're just going through the motions. Paul gives us three things to think about from our passage to break out of the cruise mode of the Christian life. First, don't settle for appearances. Get down deep with God and pray for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of God in your heart, which corresponds to the first of our points the pastor designed, a genuine work of the Spirit. [31 : 14] Don't settle for appearances. Get down deep with God and pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in your heart. Second, which corresponds to the second, the pastor's desire. renew your commitment to serving God and serving His people. And third, which corresponds to the third of our points this evening, stop thinking and stop caring what other people think of you. Stop thinking and stop caring what other people think of you. Because remember, at the end of the day, actually, it's about you and God. It's to Him you're accountable, not to me. and it's from Him you can expect the grace of Christ to supply your daily needs. Design, desire, defense. It is a good way for a minister to get out of cruise mode just to stop going through the motions and start re-engaging his heart in what God's called him to do. But it's an even way, it's an even better way for a Christian to get out of a spiritual rut and to get back to the beauty and the zeal of genuine spiritual health. [32 : 32] Amen.