

Still Imperfect Church; Still Perfect Saviour: The Christian Ministry

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- [0 : 00] The Christian ministry. The concept of a 360-degree work review is not new. A 360-degree work review involves gathering feedback on someone's performance from both their managers and their managers.
- And from one's employees. In this chapter, 2 Corinthians 5, in a very different setting from today's workplace, the Apostle Paul engages in an introspective, self-reflective type of 360-degree review.
- He focuses not just on the God he serves, although that does come first in his priorities, but upon the people God has called him to serve, the Christians in the Corinthian church.
- And in this letter, he's reflecting on how he relates both to God and those God has called him to serve. I wonder whether in this busy world we ever stop to engage in our own 360-degree reviews.
- How is your relationship with God? Is it healthy? Is it growing? And how are your relationships? How is your relationship with other Christians?
- [1 : 31] Are they loving? Are they generous? If we are Christians, we are servants of God. And if we're Christians, we're called to serve one another. How then are our relationships with God and with other Christians?
- As we pass from 2 Corinthians 4 into 2 Corinthians 5, Paul explains to the Corinthian church how he expresses his service to God in his service to them.
- Of course, we know the word minister means servant and ministry means service, so it applies to us all really. In this chapter, Paul explains three things about his ministry and service.
- First of all, from verse 1 to 10, the courage for ministry. The courage for ministry. Then, from verse 11 to 17, the conduct of ministry.
- And third, from verse 18 to 21, the call of ministry. Perhaps as a result of tonight's study, we should take an hour by ourselves this week to conduct our own introspective 360-degree reviews.
- [2 : 42] How is our relationship to God? And how are our relationships to other Christians? How healthy is our ministry and service compared to what, by grace, it could be?
- First of all then, the courage for ministry from verse 1 to 10. The courage for ministry. Over the 22 years I've been your minister, I've witnessed expressions of bravery from you, which have left me simply amazed.
- There's the kind of bravery which comes from courageously battling with a life-threatening disease. The kind of bravery which endures devastating personal grief.
- The kind of bravery which takes risks in mission and evangelism. The kind of bravery which battles against mental health challenges.
- I've learned from you that there are many kinds of courage. And in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 1 through 10, Paul expresses his own kind of courage.

[3 : 50] A courage for ministry. Not just any kind of ministry, but a ministry exercised in the face of great opposition. In chapter 4 and verse 16, he's already said that his outer nature is wasting away.

His mind and his body have had to struggle with various persecutions at the hands of Romans and Jews alike. Furthermore, he's had to struggle with various rejections and betrayals from the churches he himself has founded.

It took courage for Paul not to throw it all in and retire to a quiet, private life. And yet in verse 6, and in verse 6, he says of himself and his missionary companions, verse 6 and verse 8, we are of good courage.

We're of good courage. But how could he say that? He's a bruised and battered servant of Christ. His body and his mind are broken. And he's pressured by his daily anxieties for all the churches.

The Corinthian church to which he's writing were very unhappy with him. They were being drawn to the ministry of false teachers. So from a worldly perspective, he didn't have an awful lot in which to take courage.

[5 : 04] But in these verses, he finds courage not by looking at things in the present, but the future. The present situation he faces may not give him much cause for hope, but the future could not look brighter.

It's the future which gives him strength to minister with such courage in the present. Where do the lights in this building get their power from? It's not from inside the building, but from electrical cables outside, joining with other electrical cables, until they all reach a power station.

And in the same way, the courage of the Christian does not come from inside, but from outside, from her vision of the future. And the overwhelming vision of this passage is that of the future of the Christian.

So Paul begins by saying, we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, our bodies, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

And again in verse 6, we are always of good courage. We know that while we're at home in the body, we're away from the Lord.

[6 : 22] The body broken in the service of the Lord, the mind shattered in ministering to straying and biting sheep, they will be renewed.

They will be clothed with a new body and a new mind. He looks forward, does Paul, to his eternal home with the Lord.

And that is what gives him the courage to selflessly pursue gospel ministry. He knows it will kill him, as according to church tradition, it did.

But Paul deems it all worth it, because his eyes were not fixed on his present afflictions, but on his future glory. In verse 7, he says that he's walking not by the sight of things he can see, but by faith in things that he cannot see, the promises of the future.

Far, far too much of our ministry today is measured by what we can see. Our moods go up and down based upon the health of our churches, by whatever measure we calculate health.

[7 : 37] Paul's courage was fixed, rather, by his faith in the promises of God, that his glorious future was secure in the hands of his glorious God. He also ends this section with a focus on the future.

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he's done in the body, whether good or evil. Many will appear in heaven with minds intact and bodies unbroken because they sacrificed nothing in the service of the Lord.

Others will appear with minds shattered and bodies broken because they sacrificed everything in the service of the Lord. Which would you rather be?

Because for sure you can seldom have one without the other. With eyes fixed on that great day when we shall appear before the judgment seat of Christ, Paul says, we make it our aim to please him.

Isn't this our prayer? Lord, I want to be pleasing in your sight. So often we live for pleasure, our pleasure. There's nothing wrong with living for pleasure if the pleasure we seek is not our pleasure, but Christ's pleasure.

[8 : 58] Challenges us, does it not? In what ways am I living to please God? In what ways am I living to please God? And is this my ultimate aim in life for which I'm willing to endure persecution, sufferings, and brokenness in his service?

That can only be our aim if our eyes are fixed on his promises for our future blessedness. And as Paul says in verse 5, God has given us his Holy Spirit as the guarantee of his promises.

For Paul, it's not Dutch courage. It's divine courage. The courage of the Holy Spirit who lives within him, pointing to the promises of the future and serving as the guarantee and assurance of these promises.

In our fellowship, we have some couples who are engaged and the women are wearing engagement rings assuring them that they will soon be married. Nothing shall get in the way of those couples marrying.

They will endure and suffer much just so they can both get to that day where they speak and hear the words, I do, and finally live in that fulfillment and fullness of their relationship.

[10 : 13] What is the source of our courage in the service of Christ? When times are tough and we're experiencing pressure and fear, it's God's promise for our future.

The Holy Spirit, our divine engagement ring, assures us of the blessedness of our future with Jesus. For him and in his service, we will willingly walk into the fire of present sufferings.

He, Jesus, went willingly to the cross for us. And for him, we'll bear whatever cross he in his love chooses to place on our shoulders.

This is real courage. The courage of the Christian who's been knocked down eight times but gets up nine times because he or she knows who wins in the end.

So let me ask again, where are our minds fixed? Present or future pleasures? If it's present pleasures, we'll always be timid servants of Christ.

[11 : 19] If it's the latter, we'll be bold and courageous ministers of the new covenant gospel. The courage for ministry.

Well, secondly, from verse 11 through 17, we have the conduct of ministry, the conduct of ministry. Like all of us, Paul was on one hand a complicated man, but on the other hand, was driven by very simple urges.

And in verse 11 through 17, he reveals to us three urges which shaped the conduct of his ministry. Every Christian must think through why he or she does things for the Lord.

And these are the three things which drove Paul. In the first instance from verse 11, Paul was driven by the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord. Not the terror of the Lord, but the experience of the infinite glory of God.

He clearly remembers being on the road to Damascus when suddenly he was confronted by the glory of the risen Jesus. It was such a glory that outshined the sun.

[12 : 30] Paul was dazzled. He was blinded by its brightness. For Paul, this experience of the glory of Christ shaped his ministry. He was a changed man.

He was no longer driven by the fear of man. He no longer cared whether people thought he was in his right mind or not. It's not that Paul was wholly insensitive to the opinions of others, but what was central to his desires and motivations was that vision of the glory of Christ he had seen on the road to Damascus.

If only he could persuade others of the supreme worth and majesty of Christ. If only he could persuade them that all the world around him is as nothing compared to the supreme dignity of Jesus, it would fulfill him and satisfy his ministry.

What part does the fear of man have in our service for Christ? What part does the fear of man have in our service for Christ? Oh, I can't possibly do that.

What will people think if I do that? I'm not saying who cares what people think, but surely what people think must come a very distant second to what God thinks.

[13 : 43] The fear of man should never overshadow the fear of God. For the Christian who, like Paul, has beheld the glory of God in Jesus Christ, the fear of man is replaced by a relentless desire to persuade others to see the glory of God for themselves.

That's his first urge. Second urge, from verse 14, Paul was driven by the love of Christ. The love of Christ.

He literally writes, the love of Christ controls us. Where that word control, I think it's translated in the authorized version, I rather like this, by compelled, can also be translated as occupies my attention intensely.

It occupies my attention intensely. The Christ who met Paul on the road to Damascus was the Christ who loved Paul. Paul was life-changingly struck by how dramatic the love of Christ, that Christ should give himself at the cross for such as he, this violent, persecuted of the church.

Paul never got over that love. In fact, it was that love which drove Paul to preach the message of Christ's saving love to all who would believe in him.

[15 : 05] As we've already seen and as we'll see later, Paul suffered much on account of his ministry for Christ, but he considered it worth it because he never could get over how much Jesus loved him.

And this point really deserves a full sermon in and of itself. The love of Christ for us and for the world as the primary driver in our service for him.

What part does the love of Jesus play in our service for him? Suppose we suffer much on account of our service for Christ. Is it not all worth it given how much he loves us?

We may ask a faithful servant of Christ like Paul, why do you keep on going in ministry when it's hurt so much? To which he replies, the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.

And again we may ask him, why do you keep on preaching a message which is so violently opposed? To which he replies, because Christ loves me and all those to whom I preach.

[16 : 12] I once violently opposed the message of the gospel, but the love of Christ overwhelmed my defenses. And then in verse 17, Paul was driven by what God can do in a person.

Paul was driven by what God can do in a person. As I said earlier, in his pre-Christian state, Paul had been a violent and merciless man. But when Christ stopped him on the road to Damascus, he gave Paul a new heart.

He created Paul anew. The world outside didn't change, but the world inside Paul's heart was completely changed. He looked the same on the outside, but on the inside, he was a completely new man.

If this is what God can do for a vicious man like Paul, a man later who said of himself, I'm the chief of sinners, this is what God can do for others.

He can make a glorious sculpture from the most unpromising of material. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul lists a series of behaviors from which he had seen Christians being transformed.

[17 : 27] Listen to the list. Sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, thievery, greed, drunkenness, fraud. That's the kind of people the Corinthians were before Christ gave them new hearts and created them anew.

You know, they say that when a sculptor receives a block of stone, he does not see the stone, he sees the sculpture which he can make from the stone. And in the same way, Christ sees the beauty of the Christian he can make from the most unpromising of material.

The transforming power of the gospel of Christ meant that Paul never gave up and was courageous even when everything seemed to be going against him. And in the same way, we will not give up.

We will keep proclaiming the gospel knowing that the Christ who changed us can change others. So from these verses, these three motives for Paul's conduct of ministry appear.

The fear of God, the love of Christ, and the power of God in transformation. That's a virtue of the 360 degree review. It gives us time to remember why and how we serve Christ, even when there's opposition, or even when there seems so little in the way of results.

[18 : 53] So, the conduct of ministry, the courage for ministry, and then thirdly, from verse 18 through 21, we have the call of ministry. The call of ministry.

There are few, if any, more rewarding vocations in life than the full-time ministry of the gospel. The Israelites were commanded by the Egyptians to make bricks without straw, which for them proved impossible.

But the ministry of the gospel isn't about making anything. Everything's already been made and prepared. All the minister does is to offer what has already been made and prepared to his listeners.

The call of ministry is the proclamation of what God has already done for us in Christ. The minister is the herald of good news. The constant refrain of these verses, verses 18 through 21, is reconciliation.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The minister is the ambassador of God proclaiming that God has reconciled the world to himself through Christ, not counting our trespasses against us, verse 19.

[20 : 19] The image is taken from banking. Our sins are like debts we owe to God, debts we cannot repay. But in Christ, God no longer reckons our debts to our account.

He does this not by ignoring or cancelling our debts, but by transferring them to Christ. 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, may be one of the most important verses in the Bible.

For our sake, he, God, made him who knew no sin, Christ, to be sin, Christ, so that in him, Christ, we may become the righteousness of God.

Our debts have been paid, not by us, but by Christ. The reason God does not count our trespasses against us is because he's already counted them against his son.

Jesus has paid our debt by dying on the cross for us. As Paul says, he became sin for us. On that cross as Jesus died, a great exchange was taking place.

[21 : 34] God was placing our sins on Jesus' shoulders, and in exchange was placing Jesus' perfect righteousness as the one who knew no sin upon our shoulders.

Just as God was counting our sin to Jesus, so God was counting Jesus' righteousness to us. God has reconciled the world to himself by counting our sins to Christ's account and Christ's righteousness to our account.

and this is the heart of the gospel. We need to do nothing to become Christians.

It has already been done in Christ. All we need to do is to accept and receive by faith what God has done for us in and through his son. There's no hoops to jump through.

There's no tests to pass. We don't need to be good people to be saved. If that was the case, then Paul would not have been saved and none of us would qualify either. All we need is faith to accept what God has already done for us in the cross of Christ.

[22 : 44] We don't need to do anything to reconcile God to us. For in Christ, the reconciliation has already taken place on a small hill outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

All we need to do is to believe and in so doing receive. We can't pay the debt we owe to God, but Christ has paid it in our place.

Stand outside in the street later on and ask people going past, what do you need to do in order to get to heaven? You ask every person who walks down that street later on, they'll give you an answer, something like this, I have to be a good person.

I have to do things, I have to do things for God. But in Christianity, in Christianity alone, the correct answer is this, nothing, nothing at all, Christ has already done it.

All we must do is to believe, and it shall be mine. You see, the ministry of the gospel is one of the most rewarding of all vocations because it's the announcement of peace between God and humanity.

[23 : 56] It's the earnest appeal of the ambassador of God in the words of verse 20, on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God. It's an appeal but also a command, be reconciled to God.

The indicatives of the gospel are always followed by the imperatives of the gospel. In Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself, now you be reconciled to God.

when the gospel is not freely offered and sinners are not freely invited and commanded to be reconciled to God by faith in Christ, a biblical sermon has not been preached.

When the indicatives of God's reconciling work in Christ and the imperative command to be reconciled to God are not proclaimed, we fall far short of the ministry to which we have been called.

You know, sometimes it's really, really good to pause and conduct our own 360 review of ourselves, our attitude to God, our attitude to others.

[25 : 03] Where does my courage for serving Christ come from? How should I conduct myself in serving Christ? What is the call I have received from God and what is the content of my message?

We must all ask ourselves those questions. It is thought that at the beginning of his ministry, the Apostle Paul spent up to three years in solitude in Arabia, reflecting on all these questions.

Let me encourage you to do somewhat of the same thing, not three years in Arabia, but maybe an hour this week carved out in your diary to reflect on these questions.

Where is my courage for serving Christ coming from? How do I conduct myself in serving Christ and in serving others? What is the call I have received from God?

What is the content of the message I am to share with unbelievers? This is an especially important request to make of any here this evening who are not yet professing Christians, because I guess you don't realize the danger of being unreconciled to God, of God still counting your trespasses against you.

[26 : 20] You see, in the light of the cross of Jesus, it's all so needless. Now is the right time to accept and receive the peace God has made with you, made for you with him.

Now, now is the right time to put your faith in Jesus. Not tonight, not tomorrow, not next week, now.

Now.