

Why I will minister in this Church

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning everyone. We're going to read the Bible together now. Ephesians 4 verses 1 to 16. So it's Ephesians 4 verses 1 to 16.

As a prisoner for the Lord then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.

[1 : 1 2] What does he ascended mean, except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe.

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching, and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ. From him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

So now I'll turn with you to the Word of God, which Martin has really well introduced for me this morning. The idea that recognizing that something's true doesn't necessarily mean that we'll be motivated to change our behavior, so that it aligns with the truth.

[2 : 4 0] And this is particularly true, it's true of lots of areas, as Martin highlighted, but it's particularly true of Christians and ministry, I think. Last week, Dave began the series on every person ministry, focusing particularly on verses 7 and 11 and 12, and just that confronting fact that every Christian is a minister in Christ's church, in this local church.

Put it in a very proactive way, if you're a Christian here this morning, then you should be saying to yourself on a regular basis, as Martin did with the kids, I am a minister of Christ in this local church family.

I am a minister of Christ in this church family. Now, there's no opting out on the basis of inability, because we're told also, verse 7, that Christ has actually called us into this ministry, but actually equipped us for it.

He's gifted us specifically for the ministry he's called us to. So there can be no opting out on the basis of inability. He intends you to be a minister of his in this church family.

He's equipped you to be a minister of his in this church family. He's gifted you and intends you to nurture and develop those gifts, so that they might be nurtured and developed.

[4 : 16] So the question then shifts. Not is it a fact that you're a minister, but to the more practical question, are you ministering? Are you ministering or serving?

The two words can be used interchangeably. Are you actually ministering or serving in this local church? And what makes the difference? What makes the difference in your mind between knowing something to be true, and perhaps feeling guilty if you're not doing it, and actually doing something because you're glad to do it?

Now, it's not rocket science to say that none of us find trouble. None of us have trouble finding time or effort or money to pursue the things that are important to us, the things that we would say are valuable, things that we would say desirable.

We do that without even blinking our eyes, don't we? Whether it's work or a sport or doing renovations at home or pursuing a particular hobby or leisure pursuit, holidays, or perhaps it's time to chase a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and the cost of that.

Perhaps there's activities with your spouse, your children, catching up with friends, and so the list could go on and on and on. All those things are sort of a regular part of our lives, and we don't even think twice.

[5 : 41] We just find time, we find money, we find energy to do them. Why? Because they're desirable. They're valuable. They're important to us. So, what of helping one another to grow in Christ?

Is this something that you would put right up there with things in your life that are really important, something that's really valuable and desirable?

So, friends, the real issue is not one of knowledge, but one of motivation, priority.

Motivation to minister or serve in our church family will simply be the overflow of what you think should happen in church or what you want to happen in church or what you demand to happen in church.

Again, that which you believe to be important, valuable, and desirable when you think about church and your involvement in it. Now, at that point, you see, I think I have to say, and I have to include myself here, that the sad reality is that all too often our thinking and desires for church is far too small.

[7 : 22] Worse than that, sometimes our thinking and desires for church are actually contrary to Christ's intentions for his church and his say of people within the church.

So, it works a bit like this. So, if you think of church just as a weekly box-taking activity, something that you know in the back of your mind is required for Christians, then you think, well, okay, I need to, as a Christian, I need to meet with other Christians, I need to read, I need to pray, I need to hear a sermon, then you'll actually be motivated to turn up to church, to take the boxes.

Well, mostly motivated to turn up to church, because there might be some weeks you see there'll be another box-taking opportunity that's more appealing. And so, you find yourself easily being distracted into that.

If you think of church, if you think of church like a club, where you hang out with people you like, a place where you have fun, it's meant to be a place of fun, a place where your children have other nice children to play with, a place where you can just relax, chat about your week, debrief, generally be happy and feel settled.

It's my port in a week of stormy weather. A place where you can feel secure. A place where you can feel secure. A place where you can be accepted without any questions asked.

[9 : 00] No challenges. Then, I suspect, you'll be highly motivated to get involved in a church like ours, a local church family like ours.

But I also suspect that your involvement will be very much as a selective consumer. That is, you'll almost, without thinking, invest in those people and serving those people and invest in those programs that you've already worked out will deliver the thing that you think you should get when you come to church.

So, you will orientate yourself to those people or those programs on a very selective, consumerist basis. Friends, as lovely as these things are, and all the things I mentioned there are terrific things in relationship.

Of course they are. As lovely as these things are, here's the rub. They can actually represent a redefinition of what serving ministry is.

a redefinition from what Jesus defines us to something that you're comfortable with or something that you think it should be. You'll know that I'm back from holidays.

[10 : 29] Eeyore's back. Let me say something even more confronting. These sorts of things can even be the things that keep us from being what Christ wants us to be. Imagine that.

the good things that you look forward to in our church family here might be the things that severely damage us as a church family.

Now, that's almost counterintuitive to say that we could be damaged by niceness and happiness. We could be kept in a state of continual dysfunction by these sorts of things.

A state of ill health, continuing ill health. A continual state of immaturity. It's not beyond the realms of possibility. And all the while thinking, wow, this is a good church.

It's exactly what I want. So, the big question then is what does Christ expect to see as a pattern of your engagement in this church?

[11 : 50] Well, Dave opened the verse up with us last week. Verse 12, equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

What's that saying in summary terms? Jesus expects you, you individually, to do everything you can, humanly speaking, to make this church family look and sound and speak and feel, dare I say smell, I'm going through all the other senses, and smell like Jesus.

Now, make no mistake, and we'll cover this in a couple of weeks' time, make no mistake, this sort of ministry will always involve huge cost. It will draw on your time, your money, your energy, your creative investment, and it will always have huge risks attached to it, being hurt, being worn out, being rejected, but it is what Christ himself calls us to.

And should I also add, he calls us to have known all of those things in a way that we'll never know them. So this morning, I want to suggest that the best motivation to ministry, as Martin's already opened up before us, the best motivation to ministry is longing to see the beauty of Christ displayed and developed in one another.

Longing to see the beauty of Christ displayed and developed in one another. I would suspect, and venture to say to you this morning, anything less than that, and we will find ministry just too hard.

[14 : 17] to do consistently. Anything less than that, and we'll find ministry too costly to hang in with. Anything less than that, and the likelihood is that we'll just settle into the church as a consumer.

Perhaps a really active consumer, but a selective consumer. sporadic, selective, getting involved in ways, and perhaps only in ways, where we think we will get the personal returns that we want or demand or need.

Now, a couple of headings and we'll move through this. And by the way, the introduction is going to be the longest part today, so don't despair. First major heading is ministry is the primary expression of your identity in Christ.

Dave helpfully separated out last week identity and calling, and that division remains very clear. But ministry is a primary expression of identity as well by the same token.

And in this, there's a great motivation there for it to ministry. In other words, the primary expression of ministry for me is a deep desire to show everyone who I now am at heart as one renewed by Christ.

[15 : 53] I want to be like Christ and I want others to see me being like Christ and I want others to benefit from me being like Christ that they might also become more like Christ. Again, look at verses 12 and 13, those verses.

We all attend to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that we may no longer be children but mature.

put simply again, Jesus expects us to grow up. We start as children but Jesus expects us to grow up into mature Christian adults.

Becoming ever more like him in the way we speak, in the way we think, in the way we present ourselves, and the way we behave.

When people look into our church individually and together, when they look at us individually and together, when they look into our church, what should they see? They should see you individually being focused on being like Jesus in every way possible.

[17 : 20] and they should see you totally focused on helping every other person in this church family to do the same. Paul himself, Paul describes himself as a prisoner for the Lord.

I do apologize for this cough which has already been outed. I'm not sure whether that was a good way of doing it or not, but I'm just going to return evil. No, hang on take, I got that wrong. Darn, I've been working on that line all through.

I was going to return evil for good and I got it back to front. No, I still got it back to front. Oh, shut up and move on. Paul describes himself as a prisoner or slave of Christ.

He's already used this picture of a prisoner in chapter 3, verses 1 to 7. So that tells us I think it's a really important picture for Paul. Now, when he writes this letter, he actually literally is a prisoner of the Roman Empire because of his witness to Christ.

But I don't think that's what he's referring to here. He's referring to a form of being a prisoner that's much, much more significant to him than that. That's just a circumstance. So when he says I'm a prisoner of Christ, I've actually got one, thank you, thank you very much.

[18 : 53] I just tried to avoid, thanks Alex. Sorry for drawing attention to myself guys. It's working, it's working.

Paul's speaking of something far more significant for him. He's speaking of being Christ's prisoner by right of purchase. He's speaking of a deep sense of indebtedness for everything that he now is.

He's been renewed. He's been forgiven. He's been freed from his sin. He's had the spirit put within him. He's been rebuilt from the inside out. And he knows therefore his life, his freedom, his future are all at Christ's disposal.

That's what he has in mind with this sense of being a prisoner, being a captive, being a slave. He knows, go back to chapter one, he knows his indebtedness to Christ for every spiritual and physical blessing.

Each one an evidence of God's goodness to him. And so Paul's saying, look, I am now happily, completely defined and shaped by my relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[20 : 19] And that is to be the defining shape of my life going forward, says Paul. Even more than that, he knows he is a prisoner or slave given as a gift by Christ to his church.

Paul understands the outcomes of Christ's investment in him. That this new self, that his new service gifts, that his sense of indebtedness to God's grace, all of that was pushing Paul to the time and the place and the context in which he would express all of that in the community of the church.

And knowing all of that, Paul threw himself into serving others. And it cost him dearly. The idea of being God's gift to the church was anything but a burden to Paul.

Indeed, it was a delight. because with the sense of indebtedness came the sense of privilege. That me, the worst of sinners, says Paul, should be used in such a formative way to build the church.

Whoa, how does that get to be? Well, my friends, it's exactly the same for you and me in this church family.

[21 : 56] You have been taken captive by Jesus. You have been given every blessing of salvation and family membership. You have been given service gift ministries, service ministry gifts.

And you've been gifted back into this local church family where you are now. Why? That you might expend your time, your money, your energy, your creativity, creativity, expressing that sense of indebtedness and that sense of privilege, helping us all become more like Jesus.

Now, by definition, a gift, once it's given, belongs to the one it's given to. So, here's perhaps a challenge for you in the way you think about yourself in this church family.

You are a gift given to this local church by the Lord Jesus Christ, which means, in a very real sense, that you belong to this church family.

And that should be reflected in the way you serve. Not concerned for your own identity, not consumed by building your own reputation, not content just to have a nice, comfortable club people want to join that's popular in the community, not engaging only when you see opportunity for personal reward or return, not just serving when there are no other alternative demands on your time and energy.

[23 : 44] ministry. What a wonderful motivation to ministry. I don't know about you, but it's always nice to receive a gift.

It's even nicer when you get a gift that's useful. Isn't that right? So here's a question for you. Have a think. Do you reckon others in this local church family would look at you and think, yeah, man, they're a useful gift.

I'm so glad the Lord Jesus has given them to us. Now, let me apply this in one really specific way.

And there's the danger now of sort of moving into something you'll take as guilt. I can't stop you doing that, but it's certainly not intended. Since resuming physical churching, just one application, but it sort of speaks across everything we do as a church family.

Since resuming physical churching, we've had real difficulties with the serving teams rostered for cleaning. On quite a few weeks, out of teams of nine and ten that have been rostered, sometimes only one or two turn up.

[25 : 05] Now, why is that, do you think? Why is that, do you thinking? What thinking allows us to say so easily?

Well, yeah, somebody else can do that, that famous person who's overworked in every congregation, somebody else. Because to say that assumes that their time is less important than your time, time.

And that somehow or other, others have this quantity of non-allocated time that they can then take for cleaning. Or perhaps it means that you have a sense of yourself being gifted in a way that your gifts are far too significant to be involved in cleaning toilets or vacuuming a floor.

or perhaps you just don't see cleaning as part of what's important in making this church family a good place, a comfortable place where we can learn together on a Sunday morning because we come in here and the building's nicely set out, the toilets don't stink, and the whole thing combines to the best context for us to hear the word of God and fellowship together.

See, there's something missing in the way we think about our opportunity and privilege and responsibility in serving. Now that one illustration, it's only one of umpteen ministries in the congregation, and I have to qualify that by saying we as elders are so thankful that so many people minister in so many ways on any given week.

[26 : 50] We understand that and we're deeply appreciative of that. But here's an issue, and perhaps it reflects something of our thinking generally about how we engage in ministry in the church.

Let me move on. So ministry is a primary expression of our identity, and it's totally focused on forming the mind of Christ in his people.

Last week Dave Bott took us through the early chapters of Ephesians which underpinned Paul's argument in this whole regard. Paul's, sorry, God's purpose was never simply to save us in isolation or as individuals.

His intention was always to save us into a community, a serving, other person centered community. Now here's where we've got to qualify that and spell it out.

Never happy just to be in a community of nice people, but always aiming to be a community of holy people in which family likeness is everywhere.

[28 : 04] I had Christian Dooley and his sister hanging out the other morning at our place and I was just looking for them. One's a boy, one's a girl obviously, and I was just looking back and forth and thinking, these are two peas in a pod.

Well, mind you, people say that, me and my brother as well. But you see, there's something really nice about that. People should look at our church and say, whoa, everywhere I look, I'm seeing family likeness.

I'm seeing the likeness of Jesus. I'm hearing the likeness of Jesus. And it's expressed in two very practical characteristics, unity and maturity.

how will we most demonstrate the changing power of the gospel? How will we most demonstrate the changing power of the gospel?

Answer, very simple, the first few verses of chapter four. When our practical unity aligns with the spiritual unity we already enjoy in Christ.

[29 : 11] When those two overlay are the changing power of the gospel in a big way. That can only happen, as we see in those early verses, when we've got Christ's attitudes to each other.

When we're as generous and excusing of others as we are of ourselves. When we're determined to expend all our resources for others in the church family. When we're quick to identify relational difficulties and equally quick to move to mend fences that are broken relationally.

And proper unity is actually inseparable from maturity, which is the other practical expression of the changing power of the gospel. If you look at verses 14 and 15, so that we may no longer be children, and goes on to describe a few more things.

things. There's no room in Christ's church for ongoing childish behavior, childish tantrums, selfish indulgence.

Yet, my friends, it's so common to see just these sorts of childish reactions in relationships and to the failures of others. It's common to see what's known as a syndrome of perpetual adolescence.

[30 : 39] Now, that's a syndrome in itself, but it applies well in the church. A syndrome of perpetual adolescence among Christians, and especially young Christians, not exclusively young Christians, but it's especially true among young Christians.

What is perpetual adolescence? Well, essentially, it's a refusal to grow up. It's a refusal to see church, as we're applying it here now, as something that's more than fun.

It's a refusal to step up and take responsibility and say, look, I'm not just here to have a good old time and cruise. I need to work with these people and for these people to become mature, to become more like Christ.

Now, perpetual adolescence is bad enough when you see it in young people. When you see it in people in their 40s and 50s and 60s, then you think, man, this is a chronic condition. Refusing to nurture gifts, refusing to grow up, refusing to step up into serving roles.

Maturity will only come when we dig into God's word and have it change us from the inside out. We know the truth of God's word. That's all in those verses 13 and 14. We know the truth of God's word and are prepared to speak the truth in love into the lives of those around us.

[32 : 03] I'll be saying more about that in a couple of weeks' time. That's a big one, to speak the truth in love. To have the hard conversations because we want to grow up in Christ and want that for everyone around us.

friends, the point's very obvious. If we're not doing that, if we're not demonstrating the changing power of the gospel, then I would suggest to you today that we're actually making the gospel a bit of a joke.

I mean, what is the point of the gospel if there's no changing power attached to it? So once again, let me apply it in a very raw way. What difference do you think being motivated to form the mind of Christ in yourself and the lives of others in this church family, what difference do you think that might make today?

If that was your primary concern, if that was your passionate concern, if that's what you saw as valuable above all else today, how might that change who you might seek out and speak to today?

And why you might seek them out and speak to them? And how you might seek them out and speak to them? What might that say about your commitment to small groups or growth groups as we call them, both attending regularly so that you're a support to the rest of the crew rather than send yourself, well, look, there's a half a dozen there.

[33 : 35] They won't miss me. Or engaging thoroughly. You can be there and warm a seat, but not much more. Or praying for others in the group when you're not there.

Engaging with others at their points of need and difficulty. How might that make a difference when, to your priority, when you know a relationship with someone else in the church is under pressure or seriously broken?

Is it a childish, well, it's their fault. They've hurt me. And they'll have to come and speak to me. Or a mature adult Christian response of, hey, we can't allow this to happen.

We need to get this sorted. We need to talk. We need to get this fixed. And that ultimately displays God's manifold wisdom.

And brings him honor. Chapter 3, verse 10. So, today I'm offering you two sort of major motivations. One's more immediate. The more immediate motivation to selfless serving ministry is to see the changing power of the gospel.

[34 : 50] as the mind and heart of Christ is formed in each of us individually and in us collectively. As that's the immediate motivation.

So, the ultimate motivation then is that God's wisdom in salvation will be seen by all. And God will be honored as he should be.

Dave took us through chapter 3, verse 10 last week. You can refer back to it. So, I want you to imagine this. Remember back in Romans chapter 1 Paul launches into the argument of how when we look at the physical creation we're overwhelmed.

Because we see in the physical creation a display of the character and power of God. What Paul wants us to see here is that the glory that ought to come to the Lord through this local church, community of renewed sinners is something that ought to dwarf anything that we see in creation.

And it will show the wisdom of God, chapter 3, verse 10, the wisdom of God in salvation and cause people to fall down in amazement and wonder before.

[36 : 10] There can be no better motivation to throw yourself into ministry than a desire for God's glory.

Again, make it just very simple and practical. If you want to see God's name glorified in Newcastle and beyond, it starts with selfless, committed, serving ministry in this local church.

Nothing else will motivate you to happily and totally expend yourself and your resources. Nothing else will motivate you to set good priorities for you and your family in terms of engaging in this local church family.

Nothing else will motivate you to give the best of your time, your money and your energy to serving this church family over sport or work or a dozen other things that claim your attention and your time and your money.

Nothing else will motivate you to steady, persevering ministry when you hit the wall of tiredness, disappointment or hurt or injustice or so many other challenges that come with ministry.

[37 : 20] Risks and costs, all of them associated with ministry. As I say, we'll address those things in two weeks' time. ministry will always be costly.

There's no alternative. Not ministering to your brothers and sisters will be far more costly in terms of leaving the gospel without any claim to changing power and robbing God of his glory.

Pray with me, please. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the fact that your word never just allows us to slide over it easily. Lord, it calls us out.

It exposes us. It challenges us. But Lord, it also renews us and equips us and gives us great confidence and comfort to move forward into new displays of your character as we grow and mature.

Help us, Lord, to do that individually and together. In Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Thank you.

[38 : 38] so