

Ministers of the New Covenant

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[0:00] Let me pray for us. Almighty and ever-living God, now as we come to the preaching of your word, we pray that! there would be a great sense of your spirit among us, that you would soften our hearts to your word, and that by the power of your spirit that you would be growing us more and more into the fullness of the stature of Christ, all for the glory of your name. Amen.

Amen. Well, brothers and sisters, I'm very glad to be with you today. My name, if you don't know, is Reverend Nick. Ife is a great friend of mine, a close friend. I'm church planting in Buffalo, New York, and we have our services in late afternoons, and so it's worked out a few times for Ife to come and preach for us after leading services here, and I thought I'd repay a little favor back. But I'm very glad to be with you all this morning. Today our text is going to be the second lesson from 2 Corinthians, and so if you want to have that open in your pew Bible, that will be a great help to use as I preach through it. Well, today I think we live in the age of internet grifters. Social media platforms are filled with people who promise all these kind of secret cheat codes to life that they have somehow discovered. And some of them sound plausible at first, but if you stop to think, many of them start to sound fishy. I get this ad all the time on Facebook for this mushroom coffee replacement that apparently is going to turn me into a superhuman if I drink it, or these THC-laced supplements that are all over the place pretending to be the best thing ever invented. But behind the charisma and the facade of these internet personalities is usually just the goal of getting rich off of gullible people. And these influencers today are in every facet of life, including in religion. And so over the last two years, countless Christian influencers have populated social media teaching all sorts of heretical ideas. A few weeks ago, I was talking with someone about a college student that they're close to. And this college student had started to follow this self-proclaimed prophet on TikTok. And this prophet claimed that she knew the real way to salvation, and she promised all these incredible things if you would just commit to her teachings. And of course, you had to buy her books to be able to get all that knowledge. And when the person that I was talking to confronted this college student and suggested that this TikToker was a false teacher, the student had a meltdown. How dare you tell me that I shouldn't listen to them? Who are you to tell me what's true?

I feel like it's true. Just leave me alone. I don't know if you have ever had a family member or a friend get influenced by either a false teacher or maybe a cult. But this is not an uncommon response.

It can be a challenging uphill battle to help someone get the claws of a false teacher out of their life. And that is what we essentially see Paul doing in our text today. Today, in the age of the internet, false teachers are multiplying and perhaps have greater influence than ever before.

And at the same time, the average Christian in America has less knowledge of the Bible and of theology and of the history of the church to be equipped to defend against false teachers, to recognize them. And more than this, many people have the attitude of buffet spirituality, kind of grazing from one place to the next without the ability to discern biblically and without the commitment to a teaching authority over them, a faithful gospel minister. And so what we're going to see in our text today is that we need to know how to identify and flee from false teachers. And at the same time, Jesus calls us to commit ourselves to faithful proclaimers of the gospel, faithful ministers.

[3:52] So in this section of 2 Corinthians, Paul starts to address enemies of his that are in Corinth. He says in verse 17, we are not like so many peddlers of God's word. Paul had started the church in Corinth about five years before writing this letter. But in the time since Paul had left, these other teachers had come into the church in Corinth and they had started to build a following of people within the church. And these teachers have come from far away, bringing these letters of recommendation, which was a common practice in the Roman world, essentially to show that they

had authority and status to be able to do that. And they came claiming to be apostles and not just apostles, but they claimed that they were super apostles, even better than Paul and the other apostles. They came with training and impressive skills in public speaking. They were easy to listen to. And they came preaching a very simple, simple program of salvation. Obey all of God's laws that are written in the law of Moses and you will be saved.

And so pride and self-interest, showmanship, legalism, all of these are the marks of their ministry. But they're winning the hearts of the Corinthian church. And so as a result, the Corinthian church is abandoning Paul, their father in the faith. And in this letter, Paul is reestablishing his authority as a faithful minister of the gospel against these false teachers. And so in our passage today, we see three patterns that compare false teachers to faithful gospel ministers. The first is that false teachers serve themselves, but faithful ministers seek to please God. The second is that false teachers boast in their own credentials, but faithful ministers rest their confidence in God alone. And the third is that false teachers lay heavy burdens of the law on their people. But faithful ministers proclaim the gospel of Christ. So again, in verse 17, Paul writes, for we are not like so many peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity as commissioned by God in the sight of God, we speak in Christ. And so the first thing that we see here is that false teachers peddle the word of God for profit. These false teachers have come to Corinth really with one thing in mind, their own benefit. And they don't see the gospel as this desperate, essential message of salvation to save God's people in the world, but they see an opportunity.

They see a way to take advantage of people and to benefit. And the word that's translated peddler here in the Greek, it implies a kind of back alley merchant selling damaged or false products. I went to my undergraduate. I did my undergraduate degree at Rutgers in Newark, New Jersey. And in downtown Newark, the streets are filled with these kind of back alley merchants, right? So if you go downtown in Newark, there's at least 10 years ago, all along the sidewalk, they would have their blankets laid out and, you know, a bunch of DVDs laid out or a designer Gucci purses, a rack of Ray-Ban sunglasses, but they were all fake. They would just take cheap purses and stick the Gucci logo on with some super glue.

They were garbage being sold as if it was the real deal. And the goal of those merchants isn't to sell an honest product. It's to rip people off. It's to profit off of people who don't know any better.

They don't know what they're really buying. And these false teachers in Corinth, they're functioning in the same way. Even though these supposed apostles acted like they were teaching God's word, in reality, they were selling a cheap knockoff, a twisted and broken message to profit themselves. They came with their own gospel and they just super glued Jesus on top of it. So what does that look like for a minister today?

[7:51] I think today the world is filled to the brim with false teachers who peddle God's word for profit. Now, this is what we see in mainline denominations who have abandoned the scriptures as the inerrant word of God. They twist God's word to fit their preferences and the preferences of the culture.

What the Bible calls sin, they call love. They obscure and hide what is clear in the Bible in order to fit their own desires. I think this is also what we see in many churches that are just afraid of offending people. They're so paralyzed by the fear that people will be offended and leave. And so they soften.

They remove the weight of sin, the reality of hell, in order to draw a crowd. They want to be seeker friendly and make sure that their message is going to be winsome and palatable.

Because to them, keeping a crowd is more important than faithfully proclaiming the gospel. Other false teachers, like the story I told before, pretend to offer some kind of secret knowledge that no one else has access to. They've had some kind of special encounter with God and the Holy Spirit has downloaded information just to them. And you have to go to them to get this special message. And of course, you have to pay for that.

In one way or another, the mark of a false teacher is twisting the scriptures, twisting the pure message of the gospel and selling that message to get rich off of unsuspecting people.

[9:19] But what we see from Paul is that faithful ministers live before the face of God. Paul compares his ministry in opposition to these peddlers of God's word. And Paul and faithful ministers don't obscure the Bible, but instead they speak the fullness of the word of God to the people of God. Paul and other faithful ministers don't see themselves as the originators of a message, as if they've come up with something new or that they're here to proclaim a message that they've come up with

themselves. They don't see themselves as the center of attention, but rather they are just the faithful messenger of God entrusted to them to proclaim that message.

And so Paul knows he has no authority over his message. He can't leave parts out if he doesn't like them. He can't introduce new things if he comes up with them. But as a faithful messenger sent by God, he proclaims the fullness of the word of God. And as he shares the word of God, he does so, he says, in the sight of God. He recognizes that God is watching him.

You know, when people go fishing, they often exaggerate their fishing stories, right? Like, man, I caught the hugest largemouth bass. It was 15 pounds. You should have seen it. Too bad you weren't there. And it's easy to exaggerate any kind of story, even tell a little lie when no one else was there to see it. But it's not so easy to tell a lie when someone's watching. You know, maybe I caught the tiniest shrimp of a fish the other day. But if I'm telling my fishing story in front of a bunch of people who were there, who know what really happened, they're going to call me out. They're going to expose me as a liar. And so because other people are there, because they're watching me, there's a pressure to tell the story truthfully. And I think it's the same for false teachers and faithful ministers. False teachers speak thinking that God can't hear them. And so they exaggerate and they lie. Who's going to know? Who's going to find out? But the reality is one day God will reveal all that has been hidden, all the twisting of God's word will one day be shown for what it is.

But faithful ministers, as they preach the gospel, seeking to help their people understand the scriptures and apply them, they speak the truth, even when there's pressure not to, because they proclaim the message of God, knowing that they are preaching before the face of God.

They're not focused on impressing the congregation. They're benefiting themselves. Even if they're preaching to a huge crowd or just to two or three people, they communicate the gospel message that's been entrusted to them. And so we see this radically different driving force behind either Paul's ministry and these false apostles. For a faithful minister, the goal is not self-benefit, but simply to please God. They have received the most beautiful news that they have ever heard of, that God himself, our creator, in the fullness of time took on human flesh, not to benefit himself, but to die for those in rebellion against him, so that anyone who puts their faith in Christ will have abundant, eternal life.

[12 : 35] And faithful ministers know they have been sent to proclaim this message to a lost and dying world, even if they're hated for it, even if they're dragged out into the streets and murdered for it, even if the whole world is wrong and they are left alone proclaiming the gospel of Christ, still they long to preach the pure word of God.

And what a blessing it is to find a minister so faithful. Now what's our application point in this? I think that we do well to remember that pastors who seek to please God often upset people in their congregation. Now I'm not talking about bullying and abuse, that is the activity of false teachers. But we need to remember we live in an anti-authoritarian culture.

Every day we breathe it in and out. We want to be the captains of our own ships. We don't want anyone telling us what to do. Faithful pastors have been equipped and sent by God to faithfully proclaim his word and to help us to apply God's word in our lives.

False teachers are the ones who will hide the truth from you so that you keep coming back. But faithful pastors will tell you the truth even when it hurts. And so your temptation may be to run away or to put up defensive walls and to fight back when you're confronted with an uncomfortable truth or when a sin is exposed in your life. But if you love Christ, don't punish the faithful pastor that God has placed over you. Don't run from faithful ministers who are seeking to help you apply the scripture in your life. Instead of putting up walls and fighting, submit yourself to a godly pastor who speaks the full truth of the scriptures into your life, even when that truth is uncomfortable.

So we've seen false teachers serve themselves, but faithful ministers seek to please God. And secondly, we see that false teachers boast in their own credentials. In verse 1 of chapter 3, Paul references these false teachers coming to Corinth with letters of recommendation.

[14 : 58] And so they were really just conforming to culturally normal ideas at the time about qualifications for public teaching, for what would have been normal for traveling teachers. And it was a common practice because it gave a certain degree of status. So people would get wealthy and famous people, benefactors, to write these letters of recommendation. And the stronger the letters, the more influence they could exercise wherever they traveled to. And so these false apostles have come to Corinth with these glowing letters of recommendation saying, look how great and important we are, boasting in their status. And the Corinthians were persuaded, really because

it fit within their cultural narrative about what made a person trustworthy. These super apostles had status.

They were important men in the sight of the world. And even to know them and to follow them would increase your status. And so today we don't have the same kind of cultural expectation for letters of recommendation in that way. But I think that there are other ideas that have distorted the idea of what a good and faithful pastor is. Our culture values showmanship. We have a hard time focusing on anything for more than a few minutes. And generally people don't want to have to work hard to think about things, especially religious things. And more than anything, we want to be entertained. And so we value a pastor that entertains us. People want pastors who are funny and exciting and amusing.

Our culture values business savvy. We think that the pastor should be this skilled business leader. Instead of a shepherd, he should be a CEO who knows all these business strategies for growth and who applies them to the church like a business and who carries himself as an important business leader, a man of status and importance. Our culture values social media influence. People think that if a pastor is good, he should be active on social media, he should have a following on there. A pastor is only good if he's an influencer. And our culture values numbers. Quality doesn't matter as much. What matters is nickels and noses. And so a pastor who leads a mega church must be amazing, right? And it draws people to watch online church instead of participate in a real community of faith gathering on the Lord's Day because they think the true definition of a successful and faithful pastor is this great following and a multi-million dollar budget. But none of those things are indicators of faithful ministry. Pastors are not entertainers. They are not CEOs. They are not social media influencers. And their faithfulness cannot be counted in Sunday attendance or in the budget. And Paul does not rely on having these letters of recommendation. He doesn't boast in his skill or in his social status.

And in verses 2 and 3 we see that Paul's letter of recommendation should be his faithful disciples. He writes, He writes, You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to be known and read by all.

And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

[18:17] So together, what Paul is saying is that these believers are a letter from Christ and delivered by Paul and his faithful companions that show the genuine evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

And by the work of the Holy Spirit, he doesn't mean supernatural signs and wonders, but actually he means a far greater miracle, a far greater work of the Holy Spirit. That miracle where the Spirit works in dead hearts, transforming them to trust in Christ through the preaching of the gospel. And so Paul's qualification is not in boasting of himself and getting others to boast about him, but his qualification is the evidence of faithfully making disciples of Christ through the power of the Spirit.

And Paul has been faithful to the Corinthians. Actually, the fact that any of them know Christ is because of Paul's missionary effort with them. He has laid down his life and suffered for them. But they have not given Paul the honor that is his due. The Corinthians had an obligation in Christ to be a letter of recommendation for Paul in their life.

[19:33] And so they should have, when these super apostles came to town, said, no, thank you. We don't need you. We have Paul. But instead of commending Paul, they were quickly drawn to these false teachers and they threw Paul aside like he was last week's leftovers.

And what does that mean for us? Every Christian should be committed to a faithful local pastor in a faithful local church. Not just drifting from place to place, eating along the buffet line of spirituality. And this is one of the reasons why I think the church in America has become so weak. When people treat church like a commodity to be consumed, then consumers just go from one place to the next place seeking whatever makes them feel good.

And so we've lost what it means to be committed to one another in community. And the sad common reality is churches where pastors only care for themselves and where church members betray and attack their shepherds.

But a faithful pastor is committed to his flock, not for his own benefit, but out of a love and care for the people that God has entrusted to him. And every Christian also should be committed to their faithful pastor who God has appointed to watch over their souls.

[20:58] And so friends, commit to being a living letter of recommendation for your pastor. Faithful ministers are committed to their flocks. I know that life is committed to you.

They pray for their church members by name. They tenderly care for their people. Guiding them and teaching them. Raising them up in maturity in Christ. And so be committed in return. And in this we see this beautiful picture of what the church can be. Where the flock of Christ is committed to caring for their pastor in love and support. And where the faithful pastor lays down his life for his flock.

And where that happens in the church is where people are growing to really know Christ more deeply. While false teachers rely on themselves and they take pride in worldly definitions of success, faithful ministers rely only on God for their sufficiency.

Paul writes in verses 4 and 5, Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us. But our sufficiency is from God.

[22:08] Paul's competency and his sufficiency in ministry does not come from himself, from his skills, from his qualifications. It comes simply from God who has called him.

And Paul here refuses to even compete with these false teachers. They boast about their skill and their status. But Paul doesn't say, hey, me too. I have skill and status. Look who I trained under and did all these things.

But instead, he plainly admits that he is not even worthy to be a minister. He is a man who is broken by sin. He is weak. He has countless limitations.

He lacks the kind of power, the societal, structural power that they have. And yet, God has called and appointed and sent him. And so Paul is superior than these supposed super apostles, not because of something in him, but simply by the calling of God.

And this is the way that God has worked through all of redemptive history. We can think of all the characters in the Bible, people like Moses and others. God did not call because they were so great. But in their weakness, they served the Lord.

[23:15] The spirit was at work. And God was brought all the more glory as a result. And so faithful ministers rely on God as they preach the word of God in the sight of God.

In verse 6, we see a third distinction between false teachers and faithful ministers. False teachers lay heavy burdens of law, but faithful ministers proclaim the gospel of Christ.

Paul writes, And so Paul makes this distinction here between ministers of the written letter and ministers of the spirit.

These false teachers had no spiritual power, but only a power that comes from the written law. And so what we see is that these false teachers, they taught a form of legalism. And I think that legalism is commonly misunderstood.

I was talking to a friend who was over at my house for dinner the other night. And he said something along the lines of, You know, sometimes I work on the Sabbath if I'm behind on my work for the week. Which is okay, because, you know, we don't want to be legalists.

[24:25] And I think that this betrays a faulty understanding of what legalism is. Legalism doesn't mean enforcing a strong standard of God's laws. If God commands to keep the Sabbath day holy, which he does, then obedience means keeping the Sabbath day holy.

When God commands us not to commit adultery, that doesn't mean that I should be mostly faithful to my wife Lauren, and just say, well, you know, we don't want to be legalists.

It means that God commands me at all times, in all places, and in every way to remain faithful to my wife. And seeking to obey God in that is not legalism.

So then what is legalism? Legalism is when we treat God's law as the way of salvation. Imagining that I can, by my own efforts, obey God's law and earn his favor.

And so what these super apostles were doing is they were preaching a message of obeying the law of Moses so that a person can be right with God. And modern false teachers preach legalism too.

[25:32] You know, just be brave like David. Just be courageous like Esther. You know, you need to have an hour of Bible reading every day if you want God to be happy with you. Right? And not that any of those things are bad things in themselves, but they're preached as the way that you earn God's favor in your life.

The law says, do and do and do. And even if you've done it all, the law says, do even more. And so this message, it crushes people over time. And in this way, when ministers preach legalism, who

preach the letter of the law apart from the spirit, their message does not bring life. It kills. And in this way, many false teachers proclaim that they're bringing a message of life, but instead they bring a message of death. But Paul is a minister of the gospel of Jesus. Paul knows that it is only by the power of the spirit that dead souls are awakened to faith and to life in Christ. It is only the spirit who can transform individuals to love Jesus and to repent and follow him.

But does this mean that there's no law and that obedience to God doesn't matter? Not at all. Paul's not against the law, and he doesn't say that in this passage at all, but he makes it clear that apart from the gospel, the law is not the message of Jesus.

[26 : 56] And so before we trust in Christ, the law only accuses us of wrongdoing. It only tells us that we need a savior. But the law alone has no power to change our hearts to obey God.

And apart from faith, we can do nothing that pleases God. We can never clean ourselves up enough to earn eternal life. If a person spends their entire life seeking to do every good work under the sun, but never puts their faith in Jesus, their eternity will be suffering in hell because good works do not pay off sin.

And if we think that we need to clean ourselves up before we go to God for him to love us, then we'll never have any hope. We need a savior by grace through faith.

And so unless the law becomes internalized by the power of the spirit, its only ability is to kill and to accuse. But the spirit enlivens us to trust the gospel and receive the gift of Christ.

But he doesn't stop there. The spirit writes the law, not on tablets of stone, but in our hearts. And as God implants the law in our hearts through the scriptures being preached, through prayer, through the sacraments, he transforms us little by little to desire to obey God.

[28 : 20] Not as a means of salvation, but as a joyful expression of our gratitude for what Christ has done for us. Apart from the work of the spirit, I love my sin.

And I hate being told that I'm doing something wrong. But as I hear the gospel and as I put my faith in Christ, the spirit works to transform my heart. And I don't strive to obey the law because I want God to be pleased with me.

But I know that in Christ, I am loved by God. And instead, by the power of the spirit, my soul becomes hungry for a better way. I grow in my love for Jesus.

I increase in my desire to be like Jesus. And I begin to hate my sin rather than to love my sin. And I start to long for eternity where temptation and sin will be done away with.

There's this beautiful story in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Great Divorce*. And this one person has been taunted by a particular sin for their whole life. And it's pictured as this lizard on their shoulder whispering in his ear.

[29 : 25] And all through his life, this sin, this temptation has taunted him again and again. And even in the story, the lizard is whispering in his ear, Do you really want to live without me? How could you live without me?

But finally, on the threshold of heaven, the man allows this mighty angel to break the back of the lizard. And now, in the glory of heaven, that man is free from the taunting and nagging sin forever and ever.

And through the gospel, we learn to long for that same freedom. We long more and more to have the backs of our sinful temptations snapped and to be free for eternity.

And that is the way that the gospel applies the law to our hearts. Not by letters written on stone tablets that accuse us. Not by ignoring God's law and just doing whatever we please.

But by the power of the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel, God writes His law on our hearts. And this is the way that faithful ministers seek to transform the church.

[30 : 38] And so according to Paul, what does a faithful minister look like? They are those who live before the face of God, preaching the full counsel of God and seeking to please God. They are sent by God and they trust in God for their sufficiency.

They faithfully administer the gospel, not preaching legalism, but preaching obedience through God's grace and faith. And perhaps most importantly here, we see the preciousness of the gospel. That the gospel is this treasure to be guarded by God's people. False teachers are twisting the word of God. They trample on that pure message.

And so we need to be aware. We need to be aware of false teachers and to guard against them. Not to take it lightly in our life, but to cut them out. And we also need to gently encourage one

another that if you see a brother or sister trapped in a false teacher, don't look the other way, but warn them.

Because the genuine gospel of Jesus Christ is so precious. It is the only way to life and to transformation. And so honor the faithful ministers who labor faithfully in the gospel and reject false teachers who lead you away from Christ.

[31 : 54] Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we pray that you would be strengthening us. Give us eyes and ears to see and to hear the true gospel.

We pray that by the power of the Spirit, you would be applying that in our lives and that you would be growing us to hate sin and to love to follow you. We pray, Lord, that you would day by day be breaking the back of temptation in our lives and giving us a longing and a love to follow you more closely.

I pray, Lord, for all of us here that you would increase in us each confidence that your gospel is salvation by faith alone, that if we have put our trust in you, that you are pleased with us and that there is nothing that we can do to separate us from your love.

And again, Lord, give us wisdom to notice false teachers. Give us strength to cut them out of our lives and grow us each into the fullness of the stature of Christ.

In your name we pray. Amen. Amen.