

# The nature of true apostleship

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[ 0 : 00 ] Father, we come to your word now and ask that you would help us understand it. That your faithful word would sit in our hearts and our minds, that we might be your faithful servants throughout our whole lives.

For your glory we pray. Amen. Well, do take a seat. We are in 1 Corinthians chapter 4. So if you've closed your Bibles, it might be helpful if you open them up.

I'm going to tell you something to frighten you this morning. This is a nine-point sermon, so you can tick them off. They're not all, the points are not all as long as each other, so don't worry. But if you find it helpful to look at a list of where we're going, some of you might have picked them up on the board as you came in from the table there.

If you haven't got one, it's just like a little outline of where we're heading. If you stick your hand up in the air, Judy will come round and pass some round to you. That will give you an idea of where we are.

We're looking at nine faithful marks of gospel ministers, but also of faithful Christians. So there's something for us all here. I've lost count of the number of people who have expressed frustration to me over the last few months about how long it is taking to choose the next Archbishop of Canterbury.

[ 1 : 21 ] I have to say I share those frustrations. Part of the problem, of course, is the number of people that are taking part in being involved in making the appointment.

There is Canterbury Diocese, because after all he is the Bishop of Canterbury to start with. There is the wider Church of England across the whole of England. The Church of England is part of the worldwide Anglican communion, spreading to 41 different provinces around the world.

And all of them have their own different ideas and different cultures. They all get to have a say. And that's a bit of a problem, isn't it? Because not only are they all from lots of different places and backgrounds, but of course the Church of England itself has become far more divided and diverse over the last few decades.

Finding someone to embedding all the hopes and desires of all those different people is a practical impossibility, which I think matches up with the impossibility of doing the job. Just don't ever put me forward for it, will you?

Church in Corinth may not have had those kind of complexities, but it was still a mess. That's the title of this sermon series, Lessons from a Messy Church. It was a church obsessed with worldly power and glory.

[ 2 : 36 ] It valued style over substance. And as we saw when we began this series a few weeks ago, it was divided into factions over which leader they felt was best.

And as we'll see in the coming weeks, there were lots of theological issues and moral issues which needed putting right. But here in chapter 4, St Paul is speaking to them about the nature of true apostleship.

So they would know which voice they could trust. Personally, I think what we're looking at today would make a much better model for choosing the next Archbishop of Canterbury than the recently leaked person specification from Canterbury Diocese.

But passing that by, more than that, this letter to Paul, from Paul to the Corinthian church, should help us see what should be true of every minister in every church.

But it should also help us see what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus for ourselves. Paul is thinking about true apostles, true church leaders, but there's lots for us to take on board as well.

[ 3 : 42 ] Not least because in the New Testament, of course, we are all priests. All of us. There is a priesthood of all believers. We're all called to be servants of the King in being faithful in word and

deeds.

Increasingly Christ-like in our characters. So what does Paul have to say to us here about the true nature of gospel ministers, both with collars and without? Here's number one.

They are servants of Christ. Verse one. This, then, is how you ought to regard us as servants of Christ. The word servant here refers to a person who's been given a position of trust over something that belongs to someone else.

It's a word they use to describe the position of the highest rank slave that had authority over a Roman estate. Very often, these people weren't just lowly workers in the fields, but they rose to huge positions of power, being responsible for everything if the master was away.

But, of course, they had to remember that the estate wasn't theirs. It belonged to someone else. In the same way, Paul says, ministers of the gospel and all of us as believers need to realise that our churches aren't ours.

[ 4 : 57 ] They are God's. The church belongs to God's. That leads to the second point Paul makes in verse one. These servants are those who have entrusted with the mysteries that God has revealed.

Not out of our own imagination, but what God has revealed. We have been entrusted with the gospel. Now, that tells us something about the awesome responsibilities that both ministers and all of us share.

When Paul talks about mysteries here, he's talking about the wonderful news that through faith in Jesus, forgiveness of sins and eternal life is available to all people, Jew and Gentile, free and slave, no matter what background.

That was the message that the apostles took out.

The precious, of preciousness, of preciousness, of immense value. And you and I have been entrusted with it. We're not to stare at it in wonder like some museum exhibit behind a glass case.

[ 6 : 18 ] Wow, isn't that great? It's to be taken out and lived by and shared. The wider world might ridicule the gospel, but you and I have been entrusted with something of the highest value.

And that should give us a sense of the awesome responsibility that we have. But as Paul says, thirdly in verse 2, we are to be faithful to that charge.

Now, it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. Because servants didn't own the estates they managed, they didn't get to run the estate exactly as they wanted.

They were servants under the authority of their master. And their master would have given them instructions as to how he wanted things done. They'd been given a vineyard to manage.

They didn't have the authority to dig up all the vines and plant loads of apple trees because they preferred cider to wine. It was a vineyard. They were to manage it.

[ 7 : 17 ] In the same way, all Christians, but especially Christian ministers, mustn't deviate from the message that God has revealed. No matter what the government or prevailing culture might prefer.

No matter what other religions we come into contact with. That means declaring that Jesus is fully God. To Muslims who accept him only as a prophet. It means proclaiming to those people who follow other faiths that those faiths lead nowhere.

That Jesus is the only way to the Father. If we're in communist China, it would mean that we have to resist the communist party laws now that demand worship and adherence to the state above obedience to Christ.

And it means standing firm on moral issues. No matter what our MPs might decide in Parliament. You see, just like a pharmacist has no right to change a doctor's prescription for something they think might be better.

That'd be a dangerous thing, wouldn't it? Oh, I see your doctor has prescribed this. No, no, no, no. Let me change that for you. No, you can't do that. Pharmacists have to prescribe what the doctor has given.

[ 8 : 29 ] So as a Christian minister, I can only teach what the scriptures declare to be true. In fact, that was my solemn oath when I was ordained in this church or inducted into this church 23 years ago.

And that is true for all of us as servants of Jesus. We can't adjust the Bible to suit our own feelings and preferences. Can't take a pair of scissors to it and cut out the bits that we don't like. We're called to be faithful to the charge we've been given as servants who have been entrusted with the very words of the king.

That's what Paul means when he tells the Corinthians not to go beyond what is written. We need to stick to the scriptures to be faithful to the call we've received.

Now, that isn't easy. It isn't easy. We sometimes face plenty of opposition and no one, not even Paul, enjoyed feeling alone or ostracised.

So how did Paul deal with that? Then fourthly, he operates as if here is an audience of one. An audience of one. We're down in verses three to six.

[ 9 : 41 ] See, what matters to Paul is not that he gets good reviews on the church equivalent of TripAdvisor. It doesn't even bother him what his own congregation thinks of him. He's not even saying, well, I think I'm fine, so that's okay.

No. Instead, what supremely matters to Paul is what God will say to him on that final day. Now, of course, Paul says that his own conscience is clear. He's certain that he is doing the right thing. But he says, well, it doesn't make me innocent. He's saying, I might be wrong about myself. My own conscience is saying I'm doing well. I'm doing fine. I'm being faithful. But he knows how deceitful our hearts can be.

See, we know ourselves far better than anyone else, don't we? Except the Lord, of course. But we ourselves can fall prey to our own pride and our ego.

Someone gives us some criticism. Very often we want to bat it away rather than taking it to heart. We kind of protect ourselves. So Paul's response is not to look what other people say, nor even what he says about himself, but to seek to live with an audience of one.

[ 10 : 53 ] Now, how is that even possible? Even if we never heard what people think of us, well, we all judge ourselves, don't we? Sometimes we're our own fiercest critics, more than anyone else.

But for Paul and every Christian, there is the wonderful knowledge that the one who will ultimately judge us is also the one who saves us. We already know God's verdict on us. The Father's verdict on all those who put their trust in Jesus is exactly the same as his verdict on Jesus.

And what was that? Remember the scene at his baptism? The Spirit descends like a dove. The voice comes from heaven. You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

If you're a Christian here this morning, that is God's verdict on you. You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased. That's how Paul can live all out for God because he knows what God thinks of him and knows how God will receive him as a beloved child.

Now, that doesn't mean that Paul or we can live as we like. It doesn't mean that faithful obedience is a waste of time. Paul makes that point many times in his letters. It does mean that we can serve the Lord without fear, knowing that whatever failures we have, they won't crush us, no matter what criticisms we face, that they won't kill us.

[ 12 : 15 ] And that changes how Paul lives out his calling. So we're on to number five. It makes Paul humble. Verses six to eight. Paul knows all he has been given.

His talents, his education, his life, his calling, everything has come to him as a gift, which is exactly the way that the gospel has come to the Corinthians. As a gift, has been given to them.

They haven't earned it or deserved it. And that is true for us as well, isn't it? None of us choose our parents or our country of birth, our talents or our DNA. And whilst we've all had to work hard to make good use of the opportunities and gifts we've been given, the energy and opportunities to do that are also gifts from God.

Everything we have is a gift. The Corinthians are getting all puffed up about their own work, about their own talents, about their own connections to different church leaders.

They love the status and privileges that they have in the city. Paul knows that everything that they have and everything he has has come to God as a gift.

[ 13 : 24 ] And that makes him humble as he lives out that calling. But please don't think that true humility is thinking less of ourselves in some gloomy, dire tone. Oh, I'm such a wretched sinner.

Woe is me. Please don't look at me. I'm not worthy. No. True humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less.

Not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less. So that we are able to give ourselves for others and expand our energies and gifts on God's mission.

You're outward facing, not inward looking. Paul was humble as he lived out his calling. And his Christ-like humility also made him willing to suffer. That's our sixth heading.

You see, since Paul was confident in God's final verdict and in the eternal reward that was waiting for him, and there's a hint of that here as well, he wasn't afraid to live and speak in ways that might

end up with him being in very, very hot water.

[14:28] What mattered was being faithful, not being loved or liked. And so just like Jesus, just like many of the early church, like many believers around the world today, Paul faced suffering and persecution willingly and joyfully, not rejoicing for them, but rejoicing in them.

He knew that obedience to Christ meant hatred from the world. Jesus had said so. And Jesus had experienced it first. So Paul is not one to shy about that, shy away from that himself.

I have to say, I'd love to have more of that kind of courage. There are times when I keep my mouth shut and shy away from confrontation, from saying the hard thing. You may not think I do, but I do. But not Paul. He embraced suffering for the glory of Christ as a way to show his love for Jesus and his trust in the gospel. He embraced suffering.

But notice how Paul reacts to his trials. Let me read you verses 12 and 13. We work hard with our own hands, he said. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure.

[15:37] When we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment. Paul's confidence in God made him humble.

His humility made him willing to suffer. And he suffered. And he did suffer. And when he suffered, he was gracious under those trials. I wonder if that description I've just read to you reminds you of anyone else.

Sounds rather like Jesus on the cross, doesn't it? Returning blessings for curses, answering kindly when slandered, being treated as the scum of the earth, and yet still holding out the gospel of peace.

Doesn't that sound like Jesus on the cross? Praying that God would forgive those who put him there. Taking the abuse from both of those guys crucified on either side of him. And when one of them has a moment of revelation and sees who Jesus is, and asks for his mercy, Jesus doesn't say, I remember what you said to me earlier on, mate.

No, what does Jesus say? Today you will be with me in paradise. Paul is following the example of Jesus being gracious under trial.

[16:53] Again, that isn't easy, is it? Our natural reaction is to want to hit back. To hear that sharp comment and return with a barb of our own.

I fall into that trap from time to time. Maybe you do as well. But that isn't the way we should respond. Jesus gives us the model. Paul lived that out. And that is our calling too.

We are to return blessings for curses. We're to answer kindly when we're slandered. We're to turn the other cheek. To love our neighbours and our enemies. To pray for those who persecute us.

Of course, that isn't easy. Frankly, I think that's impossible in our own strength. But remember what happens on Pentecost Day. The Spirit comes, so we do not follow Jesus in our own strength.

As Christians, the Spirit of Christ dwells within us. And in his strength, it is possible. As is the eighth mark of true Christian leadership, and that is integrity of life.

[18:00] Occasionally, when I was little, I remember my dad saying to me, don't do as I do, do as I tell you. Maybe you remember your parents saying that to you as well. Now, I guess there are times when age and experience make that a wise thing to say.

Five-year-olds really shouldn't be lighting fires, even if their dad was a fireman. Ten-year-olds shouldn't be staying out late at night. Thirteen-year-olds shouldn't steal the keys to the car and take it for a spin around the block.

Not that I did those things, by the way. But as a general rule, our lives and our words need to match up, don't they? The message we speak needs to be the message that we live by.

That is true integrity. And Paul had that in abundance. In fact, he was so confident that as far as he could tell, he lived in obedience to Jesus. He was able to write in verses, in verse 16 and 17, therefore I urge you to imitate me.

I'm sending you Timothy. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere to every church. Paul was saying, I'm imitating Jesus, so imitate me.

[19:11] That should be something that we all aspire to, especially those in ordained ministry. But it's something there for all of us.

So to what extent is that true of us? Do our lives match our words? As we go on in our faith, are our characters being shaped more and more into the character and behaviour of Jesus?

Friends, we need that integrity within the life of the local church. How we need it in our next Archbishop of Canterbury as well. Well, here's the last one.

And maybe it's a strange one to finish on because in this chapter, Paul seems to get rather stern, doesn't he? If he is a gentle father in verses 14 to 17, well, his softer side is very well hidden in 18 to 21.

Why is that? Does Paul suddenly run out of his joy pills, become a grumpy so-and-so? No. It's because Paul, like all ministers should be, is very protective of God's precious flock.

[ 20 : 16 ] Those of you that have children or grandchildren know the angst and sleeplessness that can sometimes come when they go off the rails and behave like we used to do when we were their age.

What are they doing? They shouldn't be doing that. But for Paul, ungodliness and wayward lives are not just a season to go through. Okay, it's okay. It's just a phase they'll grow out of it.

No. Getting caught up with personality cults or seeking pleasure and power and influence are not phases that these young Christians need to go through to grow up in Christ.

Paul knows how precious the gospel is. He knows how strong the pull of sin can be. And he doesn't want any of God's precious children to be taken and to drift away and be lost.

That's how I feel too about you guys, about all the churches in this parish. Gareth would say the same thing. You are God's precious flock. And as far as we are able, we want to be faithful to the calling and gospel message we have received so that you stay faithful to the Lord you've said you followed.

[ 21 : 23 ] Now we won't always get that right. We're definitely not perfect. Just as all of you won't always appreciate our teaching or our methods.

So do pray for us. We pray for Alan and David and John and all those who preach and serve in the parish that we might fulfil that task faithfully. We need your prayers.

We need your prayers for our preaching. We need your prayers for our lives that we might, as Paul does here, embody the faith and teaching of Jesus and to have the strength and courage to teach faithfully so that you are protected and stay faithful yourselves.

Well, it's time to close. Apparently, when the famous American preacher Jonathan Edwards was offered the post of minister at his church in Northampton, Massachusetts, he replied that he was very happy to become their servant, but he wanted to remind them that the congregation would never be his master.

I'll be your servant, but you won't be my master. For Edwards, for me, Gareth, for the new Archbishop of Canterbury, whoever that might be, indeed for all of us, I think that's perhaps the greatest lesson from this passage.

[ 22 : 45 ] As Christians, we are first and foremost servants of King Jesus. And having been entrusted with his gospel message, Jesus calls us to be faithful in word and deed, not going beyond what is written in the scriptures and showing the character of Christ in all we do and say.

What a difference it would make to have an Archbishop of Canterbury who really did that. Who stood up for Christ and his teaching in our world. What a model that would be for us.

And what a great way for us to live that the glory of Christ might be seen to those we live and work amongst. What a blessing that would be to our ministry and our witness here.

Nine lessons. True apostleship. All things that have something to say to us as well. Let's pray.

Father, it is an awesome calling you have given us to be your servants and we feel unworthy to do it.

So we pray again, Lord, for your equipping, for courage and wisdom, for strength and perseverance. Lord, make us faithful, we pray. As you are faithful.

[ 24 : 05 ] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.