

Carrying the Death and Manifesting the Life of Jesus

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[0:00] We put no obstacle in anyone's way so that no fault may be found with our ministry.! But as servants of God, we commend ourselves in every way,! By great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, by truthful speech, and the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left, through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise.

We are treated as imposters, and yet are true, as unknown, and yet well known, as dying, and behold, we live, as punished, and yet not killed, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians. Our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.

In return, I speak as the children. Widen your hearts also. Join me with me in prayer as we open up God's Word together. Heavenly Father, as we look at 2 Corinthians this morning, please help us to humble our hearts, to receive your Word eagerly, and to live as God's people.

Amen. Well, I wonder how this passage makes you feel. On the one hand, it makes me feel excited.

[2:03] You know, there's this sense that Christian ministry looks like rallying together, you know, running into battle with weapons of righteousness, taking ground, conquering hearts for Jesus. It's great. It's awesome.

But on the other hand, this passage is terrifying to me. It seems like if I commit myself to gospel ministry, I can expect to get myself thrown in jail, or get beaten up.

In a sense, it makes me rethink whether I'm doing a good job with MTS. Am I really spending two years of my life training to get better at this? I don't know.

And maybe this passage is a little bit confusing as well. Well, if some of this stuff has never happened to me or to you, are we doing it wrong? Are we being unfaithful?

If this is authentic Christianity, then how is anyone actually supposed to do it? I'll come back to these questions later, but I think the key here for us this morning is to remember what Paul is trying to do in the book of 2 Corinthians as a whole.

[3:13] Paul is trying to reestablish the Corinthians in authentic gospel ministry. Because gospel ministry is the mission and the responsibility of every believer.

Someone who has been reconciled to God through this ministry suddenly becomes part of the team. We become ambassadors for Christ and start pleading on his behalf.

Be reconciled to God. This was last week. And we looked at how that's what it means to not receive the grace of God in vain. If God's grace has come to you and you've received it, let it fill you up and empower you to work hard so that God's grace that reconciled you can then go and reach others.

There's one big problem, though. The Corinthians have been keeping their distance from Paul.

Paul's got a bit of a reputation for being crazy and impulsive and emotionally unstable.

And by worldly standards, his whole brand of ministry is weak and unimpressive. But this morning, we're being invited to see how authentic gospel ministers like Paul must live cross-shaped lives because they're imitating Jesus.

[4:36] Authentic gospel ministers do ministry in a way that mirrors the sufferings of the Lord Jesus. You know, he gave out of love his life for the world, even though it looked weak and pathetic.

Authentic gospel ministers do ministry in a way that is controlled by this inescapable reality that Christ loved them and died for them and rose that they might live for him.

So how could they be sort of nonchalant about the gospel? Of course, they look crazy to the world. And Paul is reminding the Corinthians that authentic gospel ministry is cross-shaped. This morning, we have the chance to decide whether we will embrace it for ourselves. And then, actually, after that, we'll think about how we can live it out together. As we get stuck into the passage, let me give you a heads up of where we're going. I've got one big idea. This should be on your bulletins. My three main sections I've got is carrying the death of Jesus, manifesting the life of Jesus, and living this double life. [5 : 54] How do we actually do it? And then I'll conclude with some reflections on verses 11 to 13. So, come with me to verse 3. Paul starts to explain how true servants of God would commend themselves.

He says, In 2 Corinthians so far, we've spent some time thinking about five-star reviews, or letters of recommendation, and how Paul doesn't come with one. Rather, Paul has his own list of things that commend him. And it begins in verse 4. But notice how subversive this list is. It's front-loaded with stuff that we would normally see as huge red flags, signs that Paul and his co-workers are doing it all wrong. But he says that authentic gospel ministers would commend themselves in endurance, in afflictions, in hardships.

But not just hardships, calamities. I mean, surely if you're having calamities, even semi-regularly, you'd start to call your ministry methods into question. They would commend themselves in beatings, in imprisonments, in riots.

[7 : 23] Gosh. It reminds me of the section in chapter 4, where Paul describes himself as a jar of clay that just gets battered around again and again and again, but somehow never breaks.

Paul somehow endures all of this. And so let me read those verses. They're so helpful. It's from chapter 4, verse 8, going on. This should be just over the page.

He says, We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life in you. So it's cross-shaped, but his ministry is cross-shaped on purpose, isn't it? Paul is carrying around the death of Jesus so that he might show off the life of Jesus.

[8 : 45] You know, I think back to chapter 1, where the authentic gospel minister purposefully embraces affliction so that he can bring everlasting comfort to others.

You know, authentic gospel ministers are not suffering persecution by accident. No, they're committed to preaching the gospel, even if they suffer affliction, so they can bring comfort to those who are being saved.

Because they see themselves as servants of the suffering servant, they see their persecutions as medals of commendation, signs that they are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Jesus himself was mistreated beyond measure, but not because he made some big mistake, because he was determined to save sinners. So authentic gospel ministry attracts persecution from outsiders, but it also just involves unseen personal sacrifice too.

The examples Paul gives for himself are pretty mundane. Paul commends himself in tiring physical labor and commends himself through significant blows to his sleep schedule.

[10 : 03] You know, he must have racked up some devastating sleep debt, and I'm willing to bet he knew he wasn't getting those eight hours back. Paul also went hungry.

You know, later in 2 Corinthians, he says he goes without food often. But again, authentic gospel ministers see these costs as commendations.

You know, obviously, it's not like there's any inherent virtue in going hungry or going to bed late, but when a Christian absorbs the difficulties of ministry to remove an obstacle in the way of someone hearing the gospel, that's what it's all about.

You know, Mark growth groups this year, I was struck again by the amount of times that Mark says Jesus was hungry or didn't have any food. He just keeps going on about it.

He must want us to know about it. And Jesus says to his disciples, the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. And if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and

follow me.

[11:12] And so, a reminder here that being involved in cross-shaped ministry as a true disciple of Jesus means the first question I won't ask, so the first question I ask won't always be, how do I protect myself?

Instead, it looks like carrying in my body the death of Jesus and imitating him, my master, the suffering servant. All right, we'll have a look then at manifesting the life of Jesus.

I think what's even more amazing than all the afflictions in verses 4 and 5 is the way in which gospel ministers go through it. You know, they endure these hardships not with grumbling or by cutting corners.

All the while, they act with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love in truthful speech and in the power of God.

in the midst of all kinds of afflictions like jars of clay with treasure inside, there's this supernatural power at work within God's servants to manifest the life of Jesus in them.

[12:33] And the Holy Spirit is working within every faithful gospel minister to transform them more and more into the glorious likeness of Jesus even as they embrace his sufferings.

And so, they'll actually have the power to live like him when they have to endure difficulty. They don't compromise on purity. When they go hungry, they don't sacrifice their patience.

And I mean, that has got to be the power of God, surely. It's kind of like Paul's other list in Galatians 5. You know, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And Paul sees the fruit of the Spirit in the believer whose ministry is sort of full and weakness and hardship as commendation that they really are legit disciples, authentic gospel ministers.

If you're looking at all this and you're, you know, you're trying to be like this to follow in Paul's footsteps as he follows in Jesus' footsteps, how do you do it?

[13:49] You know, if you want the Spirit to be working in you and displaying patience and knowledge and purity and kindness and the love that only comes from life in Christ, what should you do?

Well, you should embrace cross-shaped ministry. This is what Paul's been saying. He's always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in his body. In other words, Paul knows that God has chosen specifically to empower weak, sacrificial, pathetic, ludicrous, and unpopular cross-shaped ministry.

And so that's the only kind of ministry he'll engage in. And he can trust God to empower him by his Holy Spirit so long as he keeps taking up his cross and imitating Jesus.

This is the same reason that authentic gospel ministers commend themselves by truthful speech as well in verse 7. They know that God has chosen only to empower a weak, stupid-sounding gospel of a crucified king and a resurrection from the dead.

[15:05] They know they'll be laughed at or even attacked for such a gospel, but they refuse to preach anything else because that's what God has chosen to empower. So one mark of inauthentic, fake gospel ministry, if we preach the opposite, is using tricky words to hide bits of the gospel or choosing to leave some bits out altogether because no one would ever believe that.

Or maybe even, you know, labeling some hard bits of doctrine as secondary or sort of tertiary issues and pushing them to the side because we think that standing on the truth will hinder our ministry.

No, genuine gospel ministry relies on the power of God to work through His Word and so genuine gospel ministers will speak the truth openly and be committed to righteousness at all times.

Paul goes on to say, with weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left, through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise is like a battle cry.

And so, just do an experiment with me for a second. Imagine in your right hand you've got your sword of righteousness. You know, you can feel it. And that sword of righteousness is for all the times people slander you and dishonor you.

[16:35] What would it look like to act righteously with your sword of righteousness in that context? I think it would look like trusting God, keeping your head, not shrinking back from telling the truth even though you smell like death and I'm sure there are lots more.

But now imagine in your left hand you've got your sword of righteousness for all the times that people honor you and praise you. What would it look like to act righteously in that context?

I think one way would be not showing favoritism to the people that admire you. Making sure you're killing pride in your heart and refusing to imagine that the aroma of life that people are smelling is actually just your charm and good looks.

I know it's a problem for all of you. Authentic gospel ministers are committed to righteousness at all times and they're empowered by God's Holy Spirit to do so as they manifest the life of Jesus.

The Spirit's work in them shows off that life and commends them to all. Now Paul goes on to finish his list by sort of peeling back the layers of the double life that disciples of Jesus are called to live.

[18:05] And at this point I'm sort of going back to the beginning and asking those same questions. Can people actually functionally live like this? If this is Christian living it all seems like too much.

Beatings, imprisonments, sleepless nights, being treated as an imposter, a liar. You know down verse 10, living a life of sorrow and poverty.

What's the secret to actually being able to live as a disciple of Jesus when this is the kind of life that authentic gospel ministers as disciples are having to endure?

It sounds overwhelming. But I think in these verses friends, we see that it's about knowing reality. whenever anybody treats Paul like an imposter, he knows that in reality he's true.

He doesn't regard himself according to the flesh like others do, but he sees himself rightly as God's apostle. Nothing can change that. Or when the Corinthians distance themselves from Paul and act like we don't know him, he knows that really they do.

[19:21] he was an open book with them from start to finish. And even if they persist in not knowing him, then he knows that even then he is known by God.

Gospel ministers might always be dying, but in God's power behold, they keep living. They might be punished, but they aren't killed. And even if they are overcome with sorrow, sorrow, and gospel ministry, authentic gospel ministry, really does bring real sorrow, even if they are overcome with sorrow, equally real for them is this kind of supernatural joy that always seems to bubble up in their hearts at the same time.

They know that they are reconciled to God, and they also know that they have been entrusted with the most precious message in the whole world. How could they not have any joy inside them?

Even though authentic gospel ministers are poor in nearly every context around the world, the reality is they are making many rich. Paul says in his next breath that actually, in Christ, they possess everything.

Brothers and sisters, did you know that you possess everything? I mean, isn't that a life-changing perspective shifting piece of information?

[20:50] You possess everything. Your inheritance is the new creation, and it's already begun inside of you. It's yours in Christ. Fundamentally, I think this is how authentic gospel ministers can do any of this.

They possess everything. They're totally free. They can embrace cross-shaped ministry, and all the pain and self-sacrifice that comes with it without fear, because ultimately they possess everything. They can count the cost of following Jesus, knowing that their light, momentary afflictions are nothing compared to the weight of eternal glory that's being prepared for them.

They can endure persecution and absorb difficulties for the sake of others. they can become poor in order to make many people rich, because they possess everything.

They could never have more than they already do in Christ, by clinging on to their money or protecting themselves or anything like that. And so I hope you can see how transformative that really is.

[22:08] we've been reminded of reality. Paul has shown us, taken us behind the curtain of Christian living and Christian life in Christ, and now we have a choice.

It's the same choice as the Corinthians have, in a way. Paul has reminded them that as he lives like this, he proves himself to be a genuine gospel minister.

His crazy, over-the-top ministry is actually just regular old cross-shaped ministry, handed down to him by the Lord Jesus. And he hopes that in seeing his genuineness or authenticity that the Corinthians will come back into partnership with him.

And so he appeals to them in verse 11 with this grand declaration of unrequited love. We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians. We've held nothing back.

Our heart is wide open. Our affection toward you has no restriction, but your affection toward us is restricted. There's not enough space in your hearts for us.

[23:24] It's like they're closed off. Oh, Corinthians, my dear children, our heart is wide open to you. In return, open wide your hearts to us. And, you know, they can see that Paul's heart really has been wide open to them.

You know, it's his love for them that drove all of this ministry. His endurance through imprisonment and beatings and riots and his sleepless nights was all done out of love for them.

And it's the same for all genuine gospel ministers who take after Jesus because Jesus' love drove himself to the cross. And that love compels everyone who follows him to do the same, you know, to embrace cross-shaped ministry.

They too are driven to self-denial out of love for others. So, even if it's terrifying, and it is, I hope you can see that doing cross-shaped ministry is really the only real way of living as a Christian.

Following Jesus looks like following him to the cross. Receiving God's grace and comfort empowers us to take on affliction for the sake of bringing God's comfort to others.

[24:50] So long as we remember that God has specifically chosen to empower this exact kind of ministry, we'll be able to partner with Paul without fear though.

Even though we're called to this, we know that God is working through this specific kind of ministry. God promises to sustain all of us who rely on him.

So, maybe you're here this morning and you need to rethink what it looks like to follow Jesus. Or maybe you're here this morning and you just need to be encouraged to lean into this kind of authentic gospel ministry once again.

In Christ, we possess everything. So, why don't we ask for God's help to live for him this morning. Let's pray together. Father, loving Father in heaven, we are reminded that living as a follower of Jesus is a call to die with him so that we might also live with him.

Please make us more and more into authentic gospel ministers who commend themselves not by worldly standards but by living like our master Jesus. Lord, please empower us by your spirit to live lives of godliness and righteousness and truth.

[26:20] Even while we embrace the difficulties of cross-shaped ministry, challenge us where we need to be challenged and encourage us where we need to be encouraged. For we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. may may may