

We continue our journey through 2 Corinthians, which we have titled *Beautifully Broken*. In our text, Paul gets real about what living for God actually looks like. He gets real about his ministry and shows us his grit. We will see how he endured tremendous pressures but didn't deviate from his message or priorities. My sense is Paul stayed the course.

And I hope we will learn from Paul's example. Each one of us is called to a life of ministry. If we learn from Paul's story, we will have the tools to have a fruitful ministry, a ministry where we celebrate God's grace at work in us to produce life transformation, faithfulness, and service that impacts others. I don't think Paul lived with regrets. And I think Paul is the perfect example for us to follow so that we might also have a regret-free ministry. The idea that each of us is called to a unique ministry may seem like a strange idea to some of us. But it is actually a well-developed idea in the New Testament.

Paul paints a picture of realistic ministry, which may shock you. He doesn't romanticize ministry. He doesn't hide the dark side that comes with doing ministry in a broken and sinful world. He reveals the amazing ups and the discouraging downs that can happen, but through it all, he gives us a guide on how to have a regret-free ministry.

Paul focused on what was important. He took bold, risky actions, and he left a legacy for the next generation. I don't think he lived with regret over unforced errors in his ministry.

I'm encouraged that this passage gives us a guide on how to have a regret-free ministry. So one day, when you and I are getting close to going home to be with Jesus, we can look back over a long life and say to ourselves, "No Regrets."

To have a regret-free ministry, using Paul as our example, we must make it a habit to reflect on what is most important. The Christmas and New Year season is an excellent time to reflect. Most of us do this anyway this time of year, especially as we close this hard year of 2020. 2 Corinthians 5:20 will help us reflect on what is most important. *"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (v. 20).*

Why does Paul choose the word ambassador as his role in his ministry? An ambassador represents his king and his government. Representing the king means you represent his message, methods, and character. Representing our King's message means

that you look at every situation and relationship in life through the lens of scripture—the center of that message is the gospel of Jesus Christ. You determine to help others look at life in that way too.

Representing his methods means that you seek to be a tool in the king's hands to bring change to the people and world around you. And representing his character simply means asking yourself again and again, "What of the person, work, and character of the Lord Jesus Christ does this person need to see from me in the situation he or she is in?" These are the kind of things Paul saw as important for him to be an excellent ambassador of Christ.

And so, as we seek to follow Paul's example, do we seek to look at every situation and relationship in life through the lens of scripture? Do we represent and imitate our king's methods to bring change in people and the world around us? Do we reflect on growing our character, so others see our king in us?

As ambassadors, we are a little weird. We don't fit well in earthly kingdoms because we represent a different kingdom. We represent a kingdom without borders, an invisible nation. The kingdoms of this world will judge our king by the actions of his ambassadors. It's as if our King Jesus is making his appeal through Paul and in generations that follow through us. R.V.G. Tasker gives a great description of the unusual role we have as next generation ambassadors.

**Ambassadors engaged in human affairs are chosen especially for their tact, their dignity and their courtesy, and because they are gifted with persuasive powers. The ambassadors of Christ should show the same characteristics. They must never try to bludgeon men and women into the kingdom of God, but must speak the truth in love, because it is a gospel of divine love that they are commissioned to proclaim.**

As a method, Paul says he implores the Corinthians on Jesus' behalf. Paul begs them to be reconciled. From a posture of humility, from the deepest feelings in his heart, he begs the Corinthians to be reconciled to God. What is that message of reconciliation?

From verses 18-19, we learn that reconciliation is only possible because of God's grace. God, in His grace, reached down to Paul while he was dead in his sins. God did it by giving His Son, Jesus, the ministry of reconciliation. So through Jesus' death and then His resurrection, Paul became a new creation, and his sins were forgiven. And as an example of more grace, God then gave Paul

his role of ambassador to represent his king to share the message of reconciliation to the Corinthians and us. And in verse 21, God's message of grace is stated about as beautiful as it could be stated. *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (v. 21). This verse reveals the heart and soul of the saving power of Jesus Christ to reconcile sinners.

God made Jesus, the perfect God-man, the spotless Lamb of God into a sin offering to die as our substitute. And through our faith in the person and our faith in the work of Jesus Christ, we become the righteousness of God. A real transfer occurs on the cross. We trade our guilt for His innocence. We trade our sin for his forgiveness. We trade our penalty for His freedom. He declares us righteous and justified, and that is how he reconciles us to God.

Why would our Lord leave heaven and come to earth to do such a thing? This Holy God loved us so much that he couldn't turn his back on our brokenness. And it's fitting that we should be reflecting on this most important thing during the Christmas season. Christmas is when we celebrate that first advent, when our Lord broke through time and space and entered our broken world.

So reflect on this: We can follow Paul's example. The Lord has given us our own kind of ambassadorship, our own kind ministry to help people become reconciled to God through our words and actions.

One day, maybe when we are 95, our ambassadorship will be completed, and we will return home. May we be able to look back and say, "No regrets. I never forgot that my ministry was to implore my neighbors, family, and co-workers to receive the good news that God wants to reconcile with all people."

I think we are beginning to see that Paul didn't just sit back and contemplate what it meant to be an ambassador. He went out and mixed it up with the people in foreign lands. And he reached out with confidence because he knew where his authority and power came from.

He didn't preach his own message; he preached his king's message. He didn't speak with his own authority; he spoke with God's authority. He wasn't out to build his own kingdom. His mission was to build God's kingdom. It was the nature of the actual king he served that gave him the confidence to step out and be a bold ambassador.

We don't want regrets about not taking bold steps in our ministry lives. So we should be encouraged to follow Paul's lead. Once Paul understood the king he was representing, he could take bold steps of faith, steps one might even call risky, but with no regrets. In the same way, once we understand the king we are representing, we can take bold steps of faith as well with no regrets.

It's a faith step to boldly stand and open our mouths to share His good news across a backyard fence, on a walk, or over a zoom call. It takes courage to ask a person spiritual questions. Bottom line: It takes faith to live our lives with no regrets. If you are struggling to understand what this means, you are not alone; the Corinthians did too. Look at what Paul tells them.

**As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. vv. 6:1-2**

What is Paul saying here? How could it possible to receive God's grace in vain? The word vain means empty, without fruit, or useless. As in any church, some of us can sit week after week and hear the grace message of Jesus Christ over and over again and never respond to it. It's tragic. I implore anyone out there listening today, who hasn't yet received Jesus as their personal Savior, to receive him today and become a Christ-follower. God's grace message is for you. Don't let his grace offered to you be in vain.

Think about what we have learned about the Corinthian church so far, which applies to any church, including ours. Some heard Paul's message and received the message of grace, and they followed Jesus with all their hearts. They knew God changed them and continued to change them. They knew God wanted their whole heart, and they knew God had given them a ministry, and they were being equipped for that ministry. They receive with joy words of Grace like these from Paul's pen:

**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2: 8-10**

Others in the Corinthians church received the message of grace and knew the Holy Spirit was inside them. But they remained led by bad habits, wrong priorities, worldly thinking, and there was little motive to actually change and become more like Jesus. In the fullness of His grace, God meets us where we are right now, but he loves us so much that he is not satisfied to leave us there. He wants to change us from the inside out. Ignoring God's desire to transform us is another way to receive God's grace in vain.

Others heard Paul's message, but were afraid, and resisted this new identity he gave them as God's handiwork created for good works in Christ. We also resist this new identity. We resist engaging and serving God by serving his people. We resist serving our neighbors locally on the peninsula and serving our neighbors around the world. Resisting the ministry that God gave us is a way we receive God's grace in vain.

So Paul exhorts the Corinthians, and he exhorts us with this, "Now is the time! Receive God's grace in it's fullest! Come to Faith. Grow in your faith. Serve in faith."

Paul refers to language from Isaiah 49:8 to make his point. He compares his role as an apostle to Isaiah's role as a prophet. Paul is calling the whole world to be reconciled to God through Jesus the Messiah. Isaiah was calling the nation of Israel to wait for the promised Messiah, who would bring reconciliation and salvation.

Paul says to the Corinthians and us, "*Now is the time to receive the fullness of God's grace.*" Not yesterday, not tomorrow; now is the day of salvation. Now is the time to surrender those dark places in your heart to God's light. Now is the time to seek a truly deeper relationship with your king. Now is the time to imitate Paul and live like ambassadors in a foreign land. Now is the time to rise up and be done with lesser things. Now is the time to live in such a way that we will have no regrets.

It's important that we remember that Paul's words in this passage are about his life and calling. He faced unimaginable difficulties. He spoke of them to defend his ministry as authentic and prove to the doubters in Corinth that he was the real deal.

As we finish these next few verses, we are going to think, "Wow, Paul's life is so unlike mine. How can I relate?" Well, we can. This list of all the things he experienced offers us principles of having a no regret ministry. That we, too, can remember what is important, take bold faith steps, and invest in things that will matter for eternity. In verse 3, Paul says at the foundation of a no regret ministry is personal credibility. We are all imperfect, and maintaining our credibility is essential.

*"We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:"* (2 Cor. 6:3-4a). Discredited in the Greek means to find fault or blame. Paul is saying, "I have no regrets because I lived my life and didn't hinder anyone from reconciling with God." Paul cultivated credibility.

Think of ways that our ministry can be discredited. Forget the headlines of famous people in ministry who have been discredited, because I know that is where our minds go. Let's look at our own hearts. It wasn't hard for me to put together a list.

We lose credibility when we break promises, live hypocritically, betray confidences, compromise principles, indulge greed, live extravagantly, behave lustfully, or lead selfishly. I know each of us could add to this disturbing list. Any one of these could topple our ministry and bring dishonor to God and painful regret to us and those who look to us.

The word Paul uses for servant helps us understand Paul's mindset here. The word means to serve with a designated focus or task. It's often used for an assistant who assists a particular

person, like a personal servant who knows everything about the person they serve—their values, their needs, their work habits, their calendar, and pretty much everything about them.

So Paul sees himself so connected as a personal assistant to his king that he is never far away from him to go off in another direction. He is intimately tied into all that the King values and does so that he isn't prone to wander.

Then Paul goes on to paint a brutal picture of real ministry. It's not for money, comfort, or ease of mind. He doesn't enjoy an ivory tower; his life will always be a struggle. This is what Paul endured, "*in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;*" (4b-5). If I were doing recruiting for seminaries, I wouldn't put these verses on the recruitment brochure.

As Paul describes this, think about a painter's pallet. Paul is laying aside all the pretty bright pastels that would attract people to real ministry. Instead, he reaches for darker colors that overwhelm the senses, which describes a realistic picture of life for those who are under the impression that the greatest thing we are called to do is going to be comfortable, safe, and materially rewarding. You get the picture of a man who was stressed out and mentally and emotionally drained in certain seasons of his ministry.

We see beatings, imprisonments, and riots. Not only did he have inner struggles, but he was also physically beaten and persecuted by his enemies. We see the sacrifice of hard work, lack of sleep, and hunger. Whatever it took to advance the gospel. This word endurance is special. It means "the ability to bear things in such a triumphant way that it transfigures them." That he could look back and say, for whatever difficulty I endured, it was for the joy of the cross. Paul had a regret-free ministry.

My regret: fresh out of seminary, took a church rescue, attendance issues, money issues, leadership issues, a changing neighborhood, a lot of crime. It wasn't unusual to see used needles or human waste in the alley behind the church. I got a written death threat about six months in. I was thinking, really? I was advised to keep Julie and my little girls away from church, not work after dark. I'm thinking this little group? Why would Satan even care about what we are doing. We are not doing anything for the kingdom. One might say, awesome this is wear the action is. Not me. I struggled. I fought it. I tried to cast vision for this little loving remnant but my heart was far from there and I was trying to figure out how to leave. Talk about double minded. Lack of spine, courage, and toughness to deal with tough people. As a friend once told me, "I was a Starbucks guy in a Hell's Angels World."

I remember after I announced that I had taken another call to be the pastor in another church, this wonderful and mature Christian woman from our church lady came in and said, "So,

it's hard and you are leaving us." That hurt. It was hard to look at her. I didn't feel like a good pastor. I felt like a 30-year-old punk who loved his comforts more than he loved God's people. And my deepest regret is that I didn't stick it out for at least five more years.

Looking back, that was an example of when I received God's grace in vain. You have examples too. Looking back with regret, I now see that God had something more for me to learn by staying put longer. There was something I missed that would have been transformative if I would have seen that calling as His grace, not as being sidelined. But it was easier to hope for another church and then move to a community where I didn't need a car alarm.

### **Live With Integrity**

Now Paul fills in the darker tones of his painting with nine beams of light, reminding us that even in the midst of the gloom, God is present to see him through. He says,

**in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left. vv. 6-7**

There are two divisions here, each containing four parts. The first four are consistent qualities of Paul's life. Purity is first. Yes, we, like Paul, live in days of widespread immorality. He traveled to places where no one knew him, and he realized he had to be careful to see that his mind and his thoughts remained pure. Understanding is next. What enabled him to stay pure was that his mind was continually being renewed by the Holy Spirit as he fed on God's word.

After understanding comes patience. It's interesting how people can get to us. How hard it is to put up with some, forgive them, and ignore some of their irritating ways. Paul had to learn patience to have a no regret ministry.

Then there is kindness and then linked to kindness is genuine love. As we talked about last week, the thing that seems to hold us together in tough times is the amazing love God has for us. We have a place of hope, security, and rest. It's found in these three words: "God is Love."

Truthful speech. This is speech from the word of God. Next, we have the power of God, which is demonstrated by a faithful reliance on God. Faithfulness that even in the simplest things Paul did in his life, he knew God was at work.

Weapons of righteousness: This is an awareness of the spiritual combat he was in against evil powers and that these battles required a different set of weapons. Instead of guns, knives, and spears, this combat required prayer, God's Word, and faith.

Then Paul closes with this wonderful series of contrasts. I don't even need to comment on them. They are so self-evident. Any no regret ministry will be characterized by extreme ups and downs, the best and worst of times.

### **Navigate Through the Best and Worst of Times**

Paul writes,

**through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. vv. 8-10**

Here are some questions for us to ponder as we consider Paul's example to us on how to live a regret-free ministry. As you reflect on what is truly important, do you need to ask God for the fullness of God's grace to save you, grow you, or use you? Are you playing it too safe right now, refusing to take bold ministry steps? Will anything you are doing now live on after you die?

Now is the time to receive the fullness of God's grace so that we can be credible servants, endure difficulties, and live with integrity through the best and the worst of times so we can live a regret-free ministry.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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