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1 Corinthians 4:6-21

Seventh Message

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AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

In her book *Epistles Now*, Leslie Brandt writes a paraphrase of a portion of 2 Corinthians 11 that captures the thrust of the passage we will be looking at this morning:

There are times when it is necessary to consider amongst the scores of self-appointed preachers and prophets about us, who really speaks for God and who is merely padding his ego or filling his own pockets. Many of the sermons that saturate our airwaves, or the books that make best-selling lists, are, in spite of pious references to the Almighty, vain attempts at self-aggrandizement and do very little for the Kingdom of God. We must learn how to separate the wheat from the chaff, the truth from a myriad of half-truths, lest we be led astray by articulate speech or pulpit personality or the innumerable gimmicks designed to attract the bewildered masses. Unfortunately, we are often more impressed by statistics than we are by the quality of that which is foisted upon the public.

Whereas we must be careful in our judgements of God's servants, we need keen minds and sharp wits to determine who they are who really are serving the Lord and to whom we may listen with confidence and trust. We may all be suspected and accused of having ulterior motives in our pursuit of converts. But there are some who are genuine while others are not. We have no acid test that will immediately separate the authentic from the less than authentic. But we can ask certain questions that may resolve in strengthening or destroying our confidence in these people.

These helpful words form a good introduction to our study today.

In this section the apostle Paul concludes his teaching concerning division in the church in Corinth. As we read these verses we will notice that Paul had a great concern for the church there, as he did for all the churches. As soon as the apostle left, many teachers, some good, some false, began appearing at the doorstep of the Corinthian church. Some of them looked better than Paul. They preached better than he did, and they appeared to have more impressive credentials. They boasted about their credentials too, and Paul regarded that kind of talk as foolish. So these churches, Corinth included, found themselves swept away by the teaching of these other communicators, many of them false prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing. With both authority and love, Paul corrects his beloved children in the faith.

In the first part of our passage, verses 6-13 of chapter 4, which is reminiscent of Paul's powerful words in 2 Corinthians declaring his weakness and vulnerability, we find three characteristics of an authentic ministry.

I. The marks of a true apostle (4:6-13)

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to Apollos and myself for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who

regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1 Cor 4:6-7 NASB)

We find the first characteristic of authentic Christian ministry in these verses.

A. Authentic ministry begins with humility and dependence

At the heart of the boasting at Corinth was the conviction that they really were a successful, lively, mature church. The Corinthians were satisfied with their spirituality, their leadership, and the general quality of their life together. They had settled down into the illusion that they had become the best they could be.

They imagined themselves to be superior because of their gift-ness. Remember the Corinthian church possessed all the gifts of the Spirit. They had miracles, healings, tongues and prophesy. Their billboard might have said, "Come Visit The Total Church—The Church That Has It All!" As he deals with their arrogance and complacency, Paul asks the Corinthians, and us as well, a most helpful and pertinent question, "What do you have that you did not receive?" The implied answer is, nothing! All the good that they possessed came from Another. Those of you with gifts of prophesying or teaching, where did you get them? They were imparted by the Holy Spirit. What a foolish thing it is to view our gifts as though we initiated them!

Have you ever met Christians who felt the way these Corinthians did? They feel they have arrived, that they have learned the whole truth and you can't teach them anything new. There are many reasons why a church adopts this false sense of having arrived, of being rich. Taking pride in the size of one's church can lead to this, as can material possessions and the amount of a church budget. Prominence, too, can lead to problems in this area.

We face that temptation here at Peninsula Bible Church. Our church is widely known. We have a reputation as an active, Bible-teaching church. There is a temptation to think that because this is true of us, we have arrived. Hardly a week goes by that I do not get a call from someone in another part of a country who has heard of PBC or has been touched by our ministry, wanting to know the secrets, the programs etc., that will make his ministry successful too. When I first came on staff as high school pastor, other pastors from around the country would call me up, asking how they should run their high school ministries. It was a heady experience. But I did not have any answers for them, any more than I had the day before I was called to the ministry. Prominence in ministry can be a temptation to arrogance.

The major point is clear: Boasting is foolish among people who owe everything to the grace of God.

Paul says he used himself and Apollos as examples, as illustrations, to help the Corinthians apply these truths. What we have said about ourselves is applicable to you, says the apostle. The illustrations and

descriptions we have used about our ministry—the figure of a garden, of a building, of servants and stewards—all these apply to you as well.

I did this, says Paul, “so that you might learn not to exceed what is written.” What was written was the Old Testament. This false wisdom was producing an arrogance that led the Corinthians to think that they could go beyond the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul says that this analysis of the nature of Christian leadership is valid for all of time. In fact, if you look in the Old Testament, you will see that this principle has always been true. Those whom God has used throughout history have been merely servants. They were not powerful or gifted people. Moses had a speech impediment. As a husband, Abraham had a lot of lessons to learn. We could name others—Hosea, Gideon, David—but God used them anyway. That has been the consistent pattern of God’s operation. He has “chosen the weak things of the world to shame the wise.” The people God uses are ordinary, common people like you and me. The greatest praise we could ever receive will be from our Lord when we see him, and he greets us with words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Commenting on this verse, John Calvin wrote:

The true basis of humility is, on the one hand, not to be self-satisfied, for we know that we have no good in ourselves at all; and, on the other hand, if God has implanted any good in us, to be, for that reason, all the more indebted to his grace.

Grace always leads to gratitude.

There is a second principle. Verse 8:

B. Authentic ministry always balances glory with the cross

You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we might also reign with you. (4:8)

Notice the irony in Paul’s double use of the word “already”: “you are filled already...you are rich already.” Paul’s use of this word indicates that he did regard what the Corinthians taught as a valid part of the Christian message, but it is not one that is fully experienced in this life on earth. We “have been” filled, enriched, lifted to reign with Christ, but we shall not enter fully into that inheritance here and now. It is a theology of glory, but it has to be in the context of the theology of the cross, which Paul will address in verses 9-13.

He acknowledges that he would love to be set fully free in Christ, together with the Corinthians: “Would that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.” He would love to have gotten beyond all the persecution, the beatings, the depression, the sheer struggle of being “fools for Christ’s sake”. The Corinthians may have arrived, but he has not. They reckon they are strong, but he is all too aware of his weakness. They glory in their reputation and their respectability in society, but he is mocked and scorned by the world. In a passage similar to those paragraphs in 2 Corinthians which describe his weakness and vulnerability, Paul paints the authentic marks of Christ’s own ministry: “A servant is not greater than his master”; and for Christ’s sake he has become the “scum of the world.”

The Corinthians were living as if the age to come had already been consummated and the saints had taken over the Kingdom. But the Kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future hope. Our witness must always express the tension “already, but not yet.” The Corinthians had the “already”; they left little room for the “not yet.”

The authentic Christian life is not always fantastic. I have a feeling that many here understand what I am talking about. You get weary of plastic smiles and hollow words, such as “fantastic,” “wonderful,” and “glorious,” used with reference to Christianity. Those words do not describe your life at all. Take comfort: they do not describe the apostle’s life either.

I am reminded of the words of the author of Hebrews in his review of those faithful believers, the “Hall of Fame” of faith. This gives another side of the picture. Heb. 11:35-38:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. (Heb 11:35-38)

All Christians are, at the same time, both kings and paupers. It is the authentic Christian experience to be wealthy in Christ and to be despised by the world. We shall never experience perfect bliss here. We shall not have perfect health, we shall not have instant guidance, we shall not be in constant, beautiful contact with the Lord. We are still human, we are still in the world, we are still mortal, we are still exposed to sin, the world, the flesh and the devil. We must still wrestle and watch and pray. We all still fail, we still fall. There is victory, there is power, there is healing, there is guidance, there is salvation, but we have not arrived. We live in two worlds, and there must therefore be tension. Paul describes the Christian’s true situation in these terms in Philippians, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake.”

There is a third principle in this paragraph. Verses 9-13:

C. Authentic ministry is never measured by nor equated with material prosperity

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour, we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. (4:9-13)

The two themes, the Corinthians’ pride, and Paul’s weaknesses, dominate this section. The apostle starkly contrasts the differences between him and the Corinthians: they have “arrived,” but he is like a man condemned to die in the arena. He imagines a Roman general’s triumphal procession on his return to Rome. The captives and the trophies are paraded as a spectacle for the public to relish, and following behind is the captured general or king, who has already been “sentenced to death.” Afterwards the captives are taken to the arena to fight with wild beasts. The Corinthians in their pride were like the conquering general, displaying their trophies. The apostles were like the group of captives sentenced to die. The Corinthians are wise and strong and honored; Paul is foolish, weak and dishonored.

They were following the ideas of the Greek philosophers, and of the Stoics, the ultimate secular humanists. The Stoics taught that the goal of life was self-adequacy. It was vital that a man be cultured and well educated, they held. He should never work with his hands; that was for slaves. He must be eloquent, a good debater, and able to put others down. But notice, Paul says he boasts in the very things the Corinthians disdain. They thought he should act just like them, and regard himself as they perceived themselves. But Paul says that his evaluation of himself is how they all ought to regard themselves.

Notice Paul says, in effect, that the apostles were “hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless.” They possessed none of the things that Roman society thought were important. We need to reflect about how much we have absorbed from our own society in this regard. Even as Christians we sometimes believe that the way to have an influence in the world is to be successful in our business and personal lives: If we just could get that promotion, then people will listen to us. When we get a nicer home, then we will open it up for ministry. But when we buy that notion, we become sidetracked into peripheral matters—how we dress, where we buy our clothes, how educated we are, how large our vocabulary is, how big our portfolio, or our house, what kind of neighborhood we live in, how funny, or how persuasive we are, etc. But those things are unimportant in terms of influence and power in the Christian life. Paul is not saying that if we have those things we ought to try to get rid of them. He is simply saying they don’t matter.

I pray that as parents we are communicating and modeling these truths to our children. When I worked with high school students, I met many Christian parents who loved the Lord but communicated to their children that what really mattered in life was not whether they loved Jesus Christ, but which university they were going to attend, or their choice of a career. I remember pleading with some parents to allow their high schoolers to go on a ministry trip to Mexico for a week, only to be told that their education came first. And this was said of good students who were doing well in school! I tried to convince parents that 10 years from now they wouldn’t even remember that their son or daughter had missed a week in school, but I could promise them they would remember their kids had spent that week in Mexico. I pray we will give much thought to the values we are communicating to our children.

Recently I came across part of a letter written by John Quincy Adams to his daughter, counseling her about marriage and the type of man she should marry. His words reveal how highly he regarded this principle we have been talking about:

Daughter! Get an honest man and keep him honest. No matter whether he is rich, provided he be independent. Regard the honor and moral character of the man, more than all circumstances. Think of no other greatness but that of the soul, no other riches but those of the heart.

For people like the Corinthians, who were concerned for their own status, reputation and popularity, authentic Christian ministry was immensely difficult to accept, let alone embrace. The truth that God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness gets through to us slowly.

The apostle’s point is clear. Believers who live for Christ will not necessarily be treated in a way that gives them a superiority complex! Being in the will of God does not necessarily mean you will be successful and prosperous in this life. The Lord Jesus was constantly in the will of his Father and yet it was the Father’s will to cause his Son to suffer.

To be used effectively by God, Christians do not need any of the things that the world considers essential for success.

Having given the authentic marks of apostleship, Paul closes this section with the words of a loving father. Verses 14-21.

II. The words of a loving father (4:14-21)

I do not write things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason, I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness? (4:14-21)

Paul assures the Corinthians that though his words may appear sarcastic he is not trying to make them feel ashamed in any wrong sense of that word. He is speaking to them as a father would his beloved children. He holds a special place in their lives. He regarded the Corinthians not just as wayward saints but as his disobedient children. He had planted the gospel in the Corinthian soil, laid the foundation for their spiritual growth, and become their spiritual father. He delivered them, fed them and changed their diapers, and in that light he would discipline them as well. He reminds them that these principles do not apply merely to Corinth, but they are universal principles that are true throughout the church. It as a father then, that Paul promises to come back. And the last thing a father wants to do when he comes home from an extended trip is discipline his children. He wants to come “with love and a spirit of gentleness, not with a rod.”

Children often make loud, boastful claims. This is a sign of their immaturity—much talk, but not much power to put their words into action. Thus Paul ends with a heartfelt plea to the Corinthians to stop boasting and grow up. When I come, says Paul, I am going to look for the distinctive marks of maturity—that quiet, irresistible power of the Holy Spirit that transforms lives.

When I think of that kind of power, I am reminded of Paul’s prayer in Colossians 1:10-11: “And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyously.” I don’t know about you, but when I think of being strengthened with all the power of God’s glorious might, I think of something big and loud and fast that is capable of all kinds of spiritual heroics. But Paul reminds us that the purpose of all that power is that we might have endurance, patience and joy. If you are able to meet the pressures, disappointments and failures in life with more stability, and gain more patience and joy in the process, then you are experiencing the full force of the power of God. Endurance is the apex of God’s power.

It is my prayer that we as a church will begin to experience more and more this kind of power. We will do that as we continue to real-

ize that our effectiveness in ministry is dependent on the Spirit of God's work in and through us, not on our education, our personality, or our position in life. It depends upon God, and it begins with humility.

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