

The Agonising Love of an Apostle

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- [0 : 00] For those who like memory verses, a suggestion for you, I have been a fool. Let's pray. God our Father, your word is light and truth. We pray that it will shine in our hearts, that we may believe it and obey it for the glory of Jesus. Amen.
- One of the most abused and disputed words is actually one of the best. Love.
- What does true love look like? The issue of love, the word of love, understanding love, the theological understanding of love, is one of the dividing issues amongst Christians, amongst Christian churches, and certainly within the Anglican church around the world.
- Love is acceptance. It's come as you are. It's open doors because God loves you unconditionally. Come as you are. And that breeds a theology of not just toleration, but a theology of acceptance.
- [1 : 12] And so actually it doesn't matter what you believe. We love you. Come. You're part of us. It doesn't matter what you do or what you practice. Come as you are. God loves you unconditionally.
- And that leads then to a theology that is universalist. All roads lead to heaven. It leads to an immorality. What you do, what sexual practices you do or don't do, etc.
- Doesn't really matter. God loves you. Come. It leads to heresy. Doesn't matter what you believe or what you don't believe. God loves you unconditionally.
- Come. God loves you unconditionally. But 2 Corinthians is just one of many passages from beginning to end of Bible that challenges that view of love.
- For what we've seen in 2 Corinthians thus far and again tonight is a love, a divine love that drives strong, forthright and uncompromising Christian ministry.
- [2 : 18] In this letter we've seen and we'll see again tonight the pain, the cost as well as the goal of divine love.
- Remember that in Corinth at the time that Paul writes this letter from Macedonia in northern Greece to Corinth in southern Greece, false teachers calling themselves apostles, maybe even calling themselves super apostles, have been infiltrating the Corinthian church.
- They've been sidelining, undermining and dismissing Paul and his ministry in Corinth in the past, ridiculing him in some way, belittling his claims to be an apostle.
- They've accused him, as we've seen in this letter, of being an inferior apostle. Not really quite an apostle. Not really got the right pedigree perhaps. Certainly not the right message.
- He certainly lacks love to the Corinthians. They suggest, in fact, it seems, that he's deceptive to the Corinthians and that he's trying to prey on them.
- [3 : 18] Somehow, in the very nature of declining to be paid for his ministry, he's actually trying to drag money out of them by underhanded means of perhaps taking a collection to Jerusalem.

They're twisting the facts to show or to argue that Paul, in fact, does not love the Corinthians and is not really a valid apostle. None of which, of course, is true.

And so what we've seen in 2 Corinthians, at least on the surface, is that Paul has launched a substantial self-defense for his ministry. But driving this self-defense are two bigger issues.

Paul's self-defense is not about restoring his reputation fundamentally. That's only a minor part of it. The two big issues that have driven this letter and driven Paul's response to the attacks are because the gospel is under attack.

And so that's why he's countering in this letter. But secondly, and related to it, the ultimate good of the Corinthians is at stake.

[4 : 26] And that's what matters most for Paul. That the gospel is restored in general and for them, and thus in response to the true gospel, they will have the best benefit, if you like, from the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

And what we've seen in 2 Corinthians is a ministry of deep love. A love that desires the ultimate good of the other.

Not a love that is a lowest common denominator. We've seen a divine love driving an apostolic love. And we'll see that again tonight.

Paul, as we saw last week, has indulged in what he's called a little foolishness. He's answered a fool according to their folly. And the folly is that the super apostles in Corinth love to brag and boast.

We might cringe at that a little bit, but that was part and parcel of a pagan world and a Greco-Roman world. And they were reflecting that culture most likely. Paul hasn't liked to do that one bit.

[5 : 30] And we saw a number of times last week how he cringes away from that sort of boasting. But nonetheless, in order to win a hearing with the Corinthians, he says, Okay, I'll play your game.

Let me boast. But as we saw last week, even though he didn't like that foolishness and boasting, what he actually boasts in is weakness. So that he's boasting ultimately in Jesus Christ.

So that's why he says at the beginning of this section tonight, carrying on from last week's, I've been a fool. Because he doesn't like to boast, even in the way that he did in the verses preceding.

You forced me to it. Indeed, you should have been the ones commending me. Not me commending me, but you should have been the ones commending me to the false apostles who've come into Corinth.

For I am not at all inferior to these, probably in inverted commas, super apostles. Even though I am nothing.

[6 : 31] Which is probably a bit of a twofold thing. Even though I'm nothing, yes, generally I am nothing. I'm just a jar of clay with treasure in it. It's the treasure that matters, not me, the jar of clay.

Picking up his illustration of chapter 4. But he's probably also quoting with irony, maybe sarcasm, the false apostles, the so-called super apostles, who say Paul's just a nothing.

So at the end of this verse, he's actually responding two ways. Yes, there's a sense in which I am nothing. I'm really just a jar of clay. But using irony as well, as he probably quotes the attack against him.

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience. Signs and wonders and mighty works. You see, that's one of the claims of the super apostles.

They're like flashy showmen walking around with a healing there and a miracle word of prophecy here or some great outstanding sign, wonder, whatever. So the crowds flock as they do even today with such so-called preachers and ministries.

[7 : 35] Paul says, yes, when I came, I did have those sorts of signs and wonders. They're not recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, but not everything's recorded there. I mean, not in Corinth, I mean.

There were others in other places. And it seems that in the early church, distinctively, there were marks of an apostle that were tied up with some of the signs and wonders and miracles, especially for those who were the initial apostles who'd seen the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

But notice how Paul puts it. The signs of a true apostle were performed. Not I performed. They were performed. The passive verb is used rather to attribute the honor of the performance of them to God, not to Paul.

But notice also how he qualifies it. They were performed among you with utmost patience. But patience in the sense of perseverance. Patience in the sense of endurance or long-suffering.

You see, Paul's no flashy showman with a little trick up his sleeve today and another one for tomorrow. But rather, the real mark of the apostle Paul's alluding to here is endurance and perseverance under hardship.

[8 : 48] And we know from this letter, in several places, from the very first paragraph onwards, how much and for how long Paul has suffered.

And we saw that most of all in the last two weeks as well. The key to apostolic ministry is not simply a miracle, but is the perseverance through hardship, even persecution.

The other, and Paul is here responding to the attack that he's not really an apostle. He's inferior because he lacked these signs and wonders. He says, no, not at all.

But I'll put them in their place. They're God's performance, not mine. And it's perseverance through hardship that matters even more.

The other part of the attack, which is an odd attack, is that Paul, in effect, wasn't really valid because he didn't charge for his ministry.

[9 : 47] That's something that Greek speakers, philosophers, orators would have done. They would have walked around the country and they charged for people to hear them. Paul had none of that. And the attack is sort of twisted back as though, Paul, you didn't love the Corinthians, and we see that because you didn't charge them.

If you'd charged them money, then it would have showed the value of what you're saying and your love for them. It's a sort of inverted attack in a way. But the opponents of Paul are twisting that somehow to get the Corinthians offside with Paul, or at least Paul offside with them.

And part of that attack was you didn't love them. So again, and we've seen this already in this letter a couple of times, but Paul yet again comes back to that issue. And notice how he expresses it in verse 13, with a little tongue-in-cheek, I think.

How have you been worse off than the other churches? That is, the false apostles are probably saying, you, Corinthians, you were worse off with Paul because he didn't do all these signs and wonders and didn't charge for his ministry.

How have you been worse off than the other churches, except that I myself did not burden you? That is, by not charging you, I've made you worse off.

[11 : 00] I mean, what a stupid argument that is, in effect. But Paul's retaliating to the argument. I'm not saying Paul's argument's stupid. It's the one he's responding to that's ultimately stupid. And notice how, again, with irony and some sarcasm, at the end of the verse, he says, well, forgive me this wrong if you really think I should have charged you.

Here I am, ready to come to you this third time, and I will not be a burden because I do not want what is yours, that is your money, but you.

And I think there he's having a side comment against his attackers. They want what's yours. They want your money. They're in it for greed. We saw hints of that in earlier chapters of this letter, remember.

Paul says, I don't want what's yours. I'm not there and I'm not coming again for your money. Yes, I'm coming for money to take to Jerusalem, but it's not for me. I want you.

I want lives that are responding fully to the gospel that I preach. That's what I want. That's what my ministry is all about. It's not about me making money out of you.

[12 : 06] Far from it. And so Paul is defending his policy. In other places, it's clear that a Christian minister deserves to be paid for their ministry. But Paul is being supported by other churches while he plants new ones so that the people who are not believers are not under monetary obligation to fund ministry that might lead them to faith.

Once they're established in the faith, then it's right for them to give for ministry as well as giving for ministry beyond their own borders. But at least by way of planting a new church, Paul's policy strictly and consistently is, I will not charge.

And so we know from earlier chapters that he was funded in part by Macedonian churches as well as his own tent-making ministry. He likens his relationship to them, the Corinthians, as a parent for children.

Paul was the one who started the church in Corinth, so there's a spiritual relationship of being like a spiritual parent to children. So he says in the second half of the verse, because I do not want what is yours but you, for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children.

That is, I'm not taking money from you, my children, but rather I'm prepared to give to you, my spiritual children.

[13 : 26] I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. And the language that he uses there to spend and be spent is unlimited.

Paul is prepared fully to actually exhaust himself, not just financially, but the whole of his life for their benefit. What a statement of love that is.

You can imagine Paul as he's writing this saying, I hope they realize how much I love them and how stupid the attack is that I do not. Indeed, clearly from that verse, Paul loves them more, not less, than the super apostles who are in it, no doubt, in part at least, for the money.

So he goes on to say, let it be assumed that I did not burden you. Nevertheless, you say, or maybe the false apostles say, since I was crafty, I took you in by deceit.

That is, okay, I'm not going to charge you, Corinthians, as though it's a sort of twisted tactic, somehow to get even more money out of them. I was crafty and I took you in by deceit.

[14 : 37] But now he asks the questions that have clear answers. Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? And in the ancient Greek, when you ask a question, often it's very clear what the implied answer is.

No, I did not take advantage of any of you through any of those I sent to you. I urged Titus to go and sent the brother with him, referred earlier in this letter.

Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Clear answer expected is no. Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Yes, we did. Did we not take the same steps?

Yes, we did. That is, I've acted with integrity, not deceit and not cunning. I'm not in it for your money. I've not manipulated you, as perhaps the false apostles are doing, as many ministers do indeed.

I've not tried to bully you into submission, indeed as some ministers do as well. Well, if you followed 2 Corinthians from the beginning of this series onwards, I wonder how you would answer this question.

[15 : 46] Has Paul been primarily defending himself before the Corinthians? Now, apart from the fact that I put down that motive at the beginning of the sermon, many of us could be excused for thinking, well, yes, Paul, that's really what you're doing.

See what he says in verse 19? Have you been thinking all along that we, that is speaking really about himself, have been defending ourselves before you? Well, it looks like it on the surface, but now Paul plows under that question, underneath the surface, to the real motives that are driving him in writing this letter and in acting as a minister and apostle of the gospel in general.

Most people would say, yes, Paul, you've been defending yourself. And he has to an extent, but only as a servant of a deeper issue and motive.

At the end of verse 19, he declares, we are speaking in Christ before God. So he's speaking here solemnly, in effect on oath. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up.

Not for clearing my name, but for building you up. Notice how he, in passing, calls them beloved. As a little gentle reminder, I love you.

[17 : 12] That's why I'm acting out of love for you and for your benefit to build you up. That's what's motivating me in this letter. That's what's driving me all through this letter, is to build you up.

What does he mean by that? To build you up? Well, the next verses explain that, elaborate on it in effect. It's about moral maturity, really. It's about growing to perfection.

It's about growing more and more like Jesus in character. So he says, for, that is, the reason why I've been driven to build you up is because I fear that when I come, on this third visit that's imminent, I may find you not as I wish.

And that you may find me not as you wish. I fear that there may perhaps be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

That's a big fear, isn't it? Quite a list of sins that he's fearing with some expectancy, some certainty, will be in existence among them. It's interesting that many of that list have appeared earlier in this letter or the first letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

[18 : 30] So in 1 Corinthians 1 and 3, we see there the issues of quarrelling and jealousy amongst them. And then, of course, in that famous passage about love, in 1 Corinthians 13, we find there mention of anger, selfishness, slander, and conceit, in effect.

Do you remember those great words? Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth, etc. Paul has written on these issues before, but they still prevail as sins in the Corinthian church.

And he's fearful that when he comes back for the third time, there will be little change, if any. You see, Paul's desire in ministry is not to win converts.

It's not a numbers game in competition with Barnabas or Peter or others. Paul's great desire is to present people perfect, ready for meeting Jesus Christ.

[19 : 42] It's the gospel in its fullness, actually. The conversion and the transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Do you remember how he put it back in chapter 3, at the end of that chapter, when he compared, in effect, Old Testament ministry with New Testament ministry?

All of us, this is the goal of the gospel, all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

Paul fears that the gospel is not having much sway in their lives morally. this is what love looks like.

This is what divine love looks like. It acts in complete integrity. It does not boast. It confronts sin.

It is the love of 1 Corinthians 13. But it is a hard and painful love. It is an unconditional love which does not settle for sin.

[21 : 00] You see, Paul keeps on loving the Corinthians though they quarrel, though they're boastful and jealous and rude and divided, though they slander and gossip and are selfish. But he keeps on loving them.

But he doesn't settle for the sin. It's a love that is prepared to pay the cost of confrontation and of rebuke. That is divine love.

That is true love. And that's the love that is driving Paul in his ministry. That sort of love is often lacking where different goals are attached to Christian ministry and church life.

You see, where the goal is survival of a little church because we fear closing if we get a little bit too old, then the goal of moral perfection in the presence of Christ is gone.

Where the goal is big numbers, the goal of the gospel is undermined. If it's simply about getting people into church or if it's about reaching financial targets or something, where they are the goals of ministry or the goals of churches, some of those things are not bad things, but they actually distort and derail the true gospel's goal, which is presenting us in the mirror image of the character of Christ in glory on the final day.

[22 : 28] Paul has been attacked in this letter time and again for being weak. Well, not in this letter, but he's referring to those constant attacks that he's weak, that he's unimpressive, that he's nothing. But he's boasted in his weakness as we've seen, especially last week.

And that's because his weakness gives greater scope and space for the exercise of divine power. But he will not shrink back from exercising strong apostles' power when he visits the third time soon to come.

Indeed, his so-called weakness has actually been a time of patience and warning for the visit that is about to come.

Now is the time to act. If you think I'm weak, then you will be surprised. For if I come and there is not the change that I fear, then watch out.

This is the third time I'm coming to you. The first time was for 18 months or so when the church was begun and established. A second painful visit that he's referred to in letters and now the third time to come.

[23 : 42] And it comes, it seems, soon after this and during which he writes the letter to the Romans. Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses. I warned those who sinned previously and all the others and I warn them now while absent as I did when present on my second visit that if I come again I will not be lenient since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me.

He is not weak in dealing with you but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

Paul begins by quoting from Deuteronomy about two or three witnesses which are needed in both Old and New Testament for establishing that something is true in a legal context.

Here the two or three witnesses are not spelled out. They could be the warnings because Paul mentions in verse two I warned those and then he refers to I warn them now so two warnings at least that he mentions.

It could be that he along with Titus and the other brother are actually three witnesses that will bear testimony to the Corinthians sins that they're not dealing with. It might be his second visit so you've got two visits or at least his third visit but presumably it's only the second and third that are dealing with these problems.

[25 : 03] What Paul is saying in this opening paragraph of the last chapter is that it takes power to confront moral issues and moral failure but because Paul loves the Corinthians he will confront them.

He will act and he will act in a way that they regard as powerful. He will do so in Christ. He's been weak in inverted commas before but that's been a part of the pattern of the gospel.

But now in the same pattern of the gospel he will be strong in rebuke. But it's a rebuke that's motivated by love. And sometimes sadly we're quick to rebuke because our love is weak.

When our love is strong we must still be prepared to rebuke carefully and lovingly. So he concludes by exhorting them in preparation for this final visit.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Examine yourselves. Living in the faith has got both moral and theological context.

[26 : 19] Are you living in the faith in the sense of the truth of the gospel and are you living morally in response to the truth of the gospel? Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?

Unless indeed you fail to meet the test. Notice how he doesn't say the Holy Spirit is living in you. Not that he denies that. The ultimate reality is if the Spirit lives in you then it's Christ who's living in you.

And we know that they are boastful of the Spirit in them as you read 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 for example. But Paul is making clear here that the Spirit or at least Jesus living in you is not about showy signs and speaking in tongues.

It's about moral growth in the character of Jesus Christ. Examine yourselves. Are you living in the faith? If Jesus is in you as he is if you're a believer then you ought to be seeing fruit and change in your life as you are changing from one degree of glory to another more and more into the mirror image of the character of Jesus Christ.

You see Jesus in you has moral implications is what Paul is saying here. Paul's whole ministry to the Corinthians in a sense is void if they fail this test.

[27 : 42] That's what the implication of verse 6 is. I hope you will find out that we Paul that is in his ministry have not failed. But Paul is not actually again defending himself.

It's not his reputation that drives that statement in verse 6. But rather as verse 7 says we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong.

Not that we may appear to have met the test but that you may do what is right. Though we may seem to have failed. That is if they pass the test they will see that Paul's ministry is valid and that in a sense Paul's ministry has passed a test.

But that's not what drives Paul. Paul's being driven by his love for the Corinthians that what they do is not wrong. That's his prime motive in writing this letter. The aim of apostolic ministry, the aim of Christian ministry, the aim of the gospel is the fruit of godliness in lives of believers.

It's not actually a strong aim of ministry training today I think where primary goals are things like survival, numbers, popularity, facilities, programs, programs and more programs.

- [28 : 59] But Paul's aim is through the ministry of the truth in verse 8 to see that the Corinthians become perfect in verse 9.

We cannot do anything against the truth but only for the truth for we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong. This is what we pray for that you may become perfect.

In the likeness of Christ meeting his character transformed into the glory of Jesus as the gospel's aim at the end of chapter 3 stated it.

That's Paul's aim for this Corinthian church. It's his aim in writing this letter. Not self-defense primarily but that the Corinthians will be presented perfect on the final day of judgment.

Literally the word for perfect there is the word for mended or mending. And Paul's prayer for them in verse 9 that you may become mended reflects the fact that they're not perfect, that they need correction or mending, fixing from their moral imperfections, from their jealousies and slanders and gossips and conceits and disorders.

- [30 : 15] But that prayer gives way to exhortation. So he says I write these things while I'm away from you so that when I come I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord's given me for building up and not for tearing down.

That is I'm warning you now in the hope that when I come you'll have mended your ways. And that's literally what he says in the next exhortation. Finally brothers and sisters farewell put things in order uses the same word as perfect in our translation.

It's lost in the translation. But we might have said Paul's prayer in verse 9 is that you may become mended. Mend your ways. Listen to my appeal. Agree with one another.

That is about Paul's appeal. And live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

Mend your ways so that you may attain the mendedness of perfection. That's what Paul's ministry is about. That's what church life is about.

- [31 : 19] That's what church ministry is about. That we are mended in ready to be perfect on the final day. It's the work of a powerful gospel to do that.

No other gospel does it. The gospel of the so-called super apostles is of course a gospel of a false spirit or another Jesus, another spirit, another gospel as Paul has said earlier in this same letter.

It's only the true gospel of the Jesus Christ crucified and risen and ascended to the right hand of God and coming again to judge the living and the dead. Only that gospel has the power to present us faultless, blameless, spotless and perfect and mended before Christ when he returns in glory.

And that is a work of grace. It's why he finishes the letter. The grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Because as Paul has said in the previous section as we saw last week, God's grace is sufficient for you.

You see, mend your ways is the exhortation. But in our own strength and effort, we won't and can't. But with the sufficiency of God's grace for us that flows from the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the power to be mended so that we reach the final mendedness of perfection is available to us.

- [32 : 41] And it's administered to us by the preaching of the same gospel. Paul's prime motive here is the Corinthians moral perfection. As he said in verse seven, we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong.

That's our motive. As he put it in verse nine, we pray that you may become perfect, mended. Paul longs on the final day to present the Corinthian church as a chaste virgin to one husband, the Lord Jesus Christ, when he returns.

That was the language we saw a fortnight ago at the beginning of chapter 11. Paul loves the Corinthians so much that he is prepared to be severe to them, to be strong to them.

He's prepared to rebuke them and to suffer for them. His ministry is rooted in the love of the gospel and in the love for the Corinthians.

Both things hand in hand. Something I frequently pray for myself, for greater love of God's gospel and love of people. Remember that Paul's ministry is driven by the love of God in Christ.

[34 : 02] Christ. So back in chapter five, verse 14, for the love of Christ urges us on because we are convinced that one has died for all. Therefore, all have died to self.

That is the love of God in the gospel for Paul and for the Corinthians is what drives him on. And that same love of God for Paul, for the Corinthians is the love that Paul exercises to the Corinthians himself.

It's what drives him on so that he doesn't lose heart, so that he doesn't give up, so that he keeps on this hard, painful slog of ministry. So that on the final day, they may be mended in the presence of Jesus.

Because one died for all. So all have died. All valid Christian ministry and church life is anchored, focused and rotates around the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the love of Christ demonstrated in that cross. And a cross whose aim is not mere forgiveness. A cross whose aim is not mere liberal acceptance.

[35 : 09] But a cross whose goal is our glorification in the presence of Jesus Christ on the day of his return. All of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

For this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. What love is this? Unconditional love.

Yes. But an unconditional love that is demanding. An unconditional love that has as its goal the character of Christ in each one of us in glory.

An unconditional love because one died for all. But demanding that all therefore have died to self.

How remote this is. From the love that comes in the sort of guise of liberal but valueless acceptance. That we see so much sadly in churches today.

[36 : 25] This is a love that is anxious for perfection. This is a love that will not settle for sin or settle for second best. This is a love that endures beatings, persecution, shame, attack, hunger, shipwreck, poverty, etc.

This is a love that accepts hardship and weakness. It's a love that says the hard words. It's a love that confronts and rebukes. Because it's a love of people that derives from the love of God in the cross of Christ.

And there is no greater love than this. For the love of Christ urges us on.

Because we are convinced that one has died for all. Therefore, all have died. For our sake, God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin.

So that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And all of us with unveiled faces seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror.

[37 : 42] Are being transformed into the same image. From one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord. The spirit. Amen.

Amen.