

The Demands of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 8th of August 2004.

The preacher is Andy Pridot. His sermon is entitled The Demands of the Gospel and is based on 2 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 3 through to chapter 7 verse 1.

For example, what will a successful church look like? Will it be fulfilling its true function when it's large in numerical terms, lots of people going along?

Will it be a church with lots of activities? There's always something going on. Will it be seen when it's a wealthy church or at least when it can pay for itself, it's viable financially? What about its leaders? Will they be popular people? Everybody loves them all the time.

Will they be strong people, not a hint of weakness or struggle about them? Will they be inspiring people, able to rally the troops for action? Perhaps they will have written books or risen up through the ecclesiastical ranks.

[1 : 13] I'll switch gears for a moment if I can speak in these terms. What about a successful Christian life? What might that look like? Someone who's always happy perhaps? Maybe it would be someone who has health and wealth, a sure sign of blessing you'd think.

Someone who always exudes a sense of peace and of joy about them all the time. Or maybe it's someone who gets along with everyone and doesn't rock the boat too much. Well, by these criteria, Paul's ministry described in the first half of the passage from 2 Corinthians today, and the kind of life God's people are called to live in response to the Gospel in the second half, well, they don't seem to quite measure up.

And passages like these are so challenging, so telling for us, because they reveal how often our criteria for success in ministry and in life has more to do with a worldly definition of these things than what God actually thinks about these things.

Our challenge then this morning is to allow God to define these things for us, to think his thoughts after him, to share his priorities, his agendas, rather than our own.

So why don't we ask God to help us do just that this morning. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for your word to us. We thank you that you teach us who you are and what it means to live for you.

[2 : 28] Please shape us by your word this morning and help us to respond with faith and obedience. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's start then with the ministry of the Apostle, the ministry of Paul, and start by reminding ourselves of the context in which this letter was written, 2 Corinthians.

What's the pastoral situation into which Paul writes? Well, firstly, we need to know that Paul had intended to visit Corinth but had been prevented from doing so.

Instead, he'd send what is referred to in other places of 2 Corinthians as a severe letter in which he had to say hard things to the Corinthians. He actually had to rebuke them. Titus, one of Paul's co-workers, had been sent by Paul to the Corinthians, to this church, to deliver this letter to them and then to bring news back of the church to Paul.

And what we have in 2 Corinthians is Paul's response to Titus' report of how the Corinthians were going and how they'd received that severe letter. Secondly, this is also part of what's happening here.

You'll remember over the last few weeks we've heard about false teachers, super apostles so-called, who had come into Corinth and were discrediting Paul's ministry, saying that the trials that he went through evidenced an unempowered and unenlightened ministry.

[3 : 44] In short, how can this guy claim to be Christ's apostle when he seems to be so weak? So you can see, can't you, with these two things combined, there's tension or potential tension, this relationship between Paul and this church.

It's sort of like a parent who's had to discipline their child and the next day the child goes to school and their friends are saying things like, oh, you know, your dad's so strict, he doesn't really understand you, he's so out of touch.

And together these things have the potential of making that relationship between the parent and their child quite tense, don't they? That's a little bit what it's like for Paul and the Corinthians.

And in this passage, in answer to the critique of the super apostles, Paul wants to reassure the Corinthians that even though he sometimes has to say hard things and he does come to them in human weakness, that his ministry is motivated by the desire to serve God and to serve his people and that it's done not in his power but in the power of God.

So on page 940, if you have that open, that's where our passage is from 2 Corinthians 6, down in verse 11 he says, We've spoken frankly to you, Corinthians, our heart is wide open to you.

[4 : 56] There is no restriction in our affections but only in yours. In return I speak as to children, open wide your hearts also. So you've got a window into the heart of Paul here, the pastor, you see?

He's like the parent who longs to be on good terms with the children that he loves but also has to discipline and correct. Okay, then we'll in the opening verses of chapter 6 or at least where we start from today in verse 3, Paul again invites the Corinthians to take a look at his life, to look at his ministry.

And when we look at the apostle, what do we see? What are the things he thinks commends his ministry? Well, they're the very things actually that the super apostles think disqualify Paul from being genuine.

Verse 3, Paul has been serving through suffering.

And rather than Paul's hardships being things that should disqualify Paul, this perseverance in and through them shows his faithfulness to God, servants of God, and love for people that goes to great lengths, even to the point of enduring great suffering so that he can serve God's people with the gospel.

[6 : 26] Now, Paul's been telling them right from chapter 1 of this letter that sharing in the suffering of Christ for the sake of God's people evidences our true fellowship with Christ. If we share with him in his death, we will also share with him in his resurrection.

And this is the great comfort of the gospel. You see, if struggles and trials and hard times signal the failure of a ministry, well, Jesus Christ himself must have failed.

Do you remember the job description of the Christ that he gave? Mark's gospel, chapter 8, verse 31. The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again.

But we were reminded last week, weren't we, that his death was no failure. By that apparent weakness or foolishness in the world's eyes, Jesus actually conquered sin and death and reconciled us to God.

And we follow a saviour, we serve a saviour, don't we, who went to the cross before he took the crown. And in this we show that gospel work is not about our power and our strength, but God's power at work in our weakness.

[7 : 37] We have this treasure in jars of clay. See, there's no doubt that the super apostles came into Corinth with great power. They were trained rhetoricians, a common sight in the first century, and people paid to go and hear these guys speak.

They were very impressive. You know, it must be good if you have to pay for it, right? That was another problem for Paul. He asked for no payment from the Corinthians. Sure sign of an amateur, of course.

They came with power, all right, but did they come in God's power? Well, do you remember Jesus' sobering words from the Sermon on the Mount? This is from Matthew 7, verse 15.

Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles?

In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

[8 : 40] Thus you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many deeds of power in your name?

Then I will declare to them, I never knew you. Go away from me, you evildoers. You see, a ministry can have all sorts of impressive things about it, but if that person shows no signs of godliness, that is, if they're a person who's not obeying the Lord Jesus, well, they're not coming in God's power, but their own, and no matter how impressive they are to people, well, according to Jesus, God is not impressed.

In fact, it is a ministry ultimately condemned by God. Well, Paul, in contrast, talks in this way about what commends the ministry of him and his co-workers. Verse 6, By purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left.

that is, he practices what he preaches. He illustrates with his life the words that come out of his mouth, knowing that it is God who enables him, the power of God, to live in that way and to carry out his ministry even through his human frailty.

He goes on, in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute, we are treated as imposters and yet are true, in season and out of season, whether people think well of him or bad of him.

[10 : 23] Paul has exercised this ministry in the world's eyes, a clown, a weakling, a failure, but not in God's economy. Verse 9, as unknown and yet are well known, as dying and see we are alive, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

Paul knows, doesn't he, that whatever is in his bank balance or bank account, he has every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. He's convinced that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, though he dies, he lives.

So in the eyes of the super apostles, there wasn't much to commend this guy. But notice, Paul doesn't try and dress his life and work up with exaggerated statistics or pretend that there's nothing wrong and sort of work out an impressive worldly resume to impress people.

Now on the contrary, verse 11, we've spoken frankly to you Corinthians, our heart is wide open to you, there is no restriction in our affections but only in yours. In return I speak as to children, open wide your hearts also.

A successful ministry? Well, perhaps better, a faithful ministry, persevering service of God in the power and the hope of Christ and his gospel and with a commitment to sacrificially loving and serving God's people.

[11 : 46] One of my favourite Christian writers is Don Carson and he's been one of the most influential evangelical writers and teachers and leaders probably in the last 25 years or so.

He's a Canadian writer and teacher. He's written scores of books that have influenced, I don't know, perhaps millions by now, I'm not sure, certainly influenced me. His father was a minister too and he talks about his father in one of his books but his father's experience in ministry was quite different.

Let me read to you about it. He says, My father was a church planter in Quebec in the difficult years when there was strong opposition, some of it brutal. Baptist ministers alone spent a total of eight years in jail between 1950 and 1952.

Dad's congregations were not large. They were usually at the lower end of the two-digit range. On Sunday mornings after the 11 o'clock service, he would often play the piano and call his three children to join him in singing while mum completed the preparations for dinner.

But one Sunday morning in the late 50s, I recall, Dad was not at the piano and was not to be found. I finally tracked him down. The door of his study was ajar. I pushed it open and there he was kneeling in front of his big chair praying and quietly weeping.

[13 : 01] This time I could hear what he was saying. He was interceding with God on behalf of the handful of people to whom he had preached and in particular for the conversion of a few who regularly attended but who had never trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ.

See, in the world's eyes, you might say that Mr Carson Senior was a failure. But who cares what the world thinks? He was a faithful soldier and servant of Christ to his life's end.

A great example to his son, you see. Because the praise and the approval he sought was not from men and women ultimately, not from his denomination but from his heavenly master.

The words he longed to hear were well done, good and faithful servant. Well, Paul moves from here to paint another picture, not this time of the apostle or the gospel minister but of the person or rather the people, every believer who has received the gospel, like the Corinthians, like us.

And this is one of those hard-hitting passages in the Bible that makes us feel uncomfortable, I think. And it's easy to explain passages like this away.

[14 : 13] People talk about how now we live in a pluralistic society, you see, and it's matured us as a church or it should anyway. It should influence the way we read the Bible because it's taught us that different religions and moralities, well, they're not in the category of right and wrong or true and false.

They're just in the category of different. In fact, to the mature person, they're even complementary. The problem with Bible writers, of course, people like Paul, was that their experience was narrow and that meant that their theology and their ethics was just too narrow.

Well, the pluralistic society is not just a 21st century Melbourne invention, is it? First century Roman Corinth was a centre of trade and commerce in the ancient world.

It was literally filled with temples, altars and shrines to Roman, Greek and Egyptian gods. In fact, it was famous for being grossly materialistic and morally decadent.

It was a very popular stop-off point because of the hundreds of prostitutes there, most of whom were temple prostitutes who were inextricably bound up with the worship of the day. You could argue that through temple prostitution, what the Bible calls immorality, was institutionally acceptable in that society.

[15 : 24] This is the world into which the gospel came and gave birth to the church in Corinth. This was the way of life that the Corinthians had turned their backs on when they turned to Christ but which still surrounded them.

This was a life that was normal, even right, for their families, their friends, their workmates who hadn't become Christians. It's a modern myth, isn't it, that it was easier to live as a Christian in the first century because things were more black and white.

There was a shared morality. It's just not true. Then and now, being a Christian was about choosing between two ways to live. It was about righteousness or wickedness, light or darkness, faith or unbelief and ultimately the truth of Christ or the lies of the devil.

Let's have a look then. What does he say? Verse 14. Do not be mismatched with unbelievers for what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?

What agreement does Christ have with Belial or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? Well, it seems quite straightforward, doesn't it?

[16 : 35] Believers and unbelievers are like light and darkness. It doesn't make sense for them to share the same values or way of life in that sense. Christians have been called out of darkness not to plunge back into it, not to get caught up again in the way of life of their pagan neighbours.

To do so would make about as much sense as a person who'd been cured from blindness poking their eyes out again. What a tragedy that would be. They were cured so they could see and Christians have been saved from a life of lawlessness so they can live righteous lives.

Well, so far so good but what does Paul mean when he says at the beginning of verse 14 and it's literally be not unequally yoked with unbelievers. What does that mean?

Well, some people see this as specifically relating to marriage that is Paul is forbidding Christians to marry non-Christians. Others would say well it actually extends further to that it's talking about not getting involved in business with non-Christians so only work for a Christian company only employ Christians only do business with Christians still others would say no that's still too soft.

Christians need to withdraw from the world completely live only with Christians talk only to Christians even if that means cutting yourself off from non-Christian family members.

[17 : 47] Well obviously then we need to read this passage very carefully that means reading it in context. I don't think that Paul means cutting off all contact all relations with non-Christian people apart from being practically impossible it's actually against what Christ called us to do he didn't take us out of the world but called us to live in the world for his sake to be salt and light in the world means you need to live in the world you need to be in contact with people who don't know the Lord Jesus and to share the gospel to evangelise of course it's handy to have friends who aren't Christians that you can share the gospel with.

Paul expects too when you read both of the letters to the Corinthians in the New Testament Paul expects that the Corinthians will be spending time with non-Christians eating meals with them that non-Christians will visit church from time to time that there'll be some mixed marriages in the church in Corinth because people got married before they were converted and he encourages those Christians to remain in those marriages.

So what is Paul saying here? Well again I think context is key and what Paul says in verse 14 actually comes to a head at the beginning of verse 16 so that one main point is being made in these verses and that is this Christians are not to participate in the religious worship and the morality that goes with that of their pagan neighbours and Paul's argument for why comes in these series of antitheses in these verses so for the first one at the beginning of verse 14 don't be mismatched or unequally yoked with unbelievers.

This is a reference to the Old Testament prohibition of crossbreeding and yoking together two different breeds of animals and the point that he's making is that believers are not to join with unbelievers in their worship and the life that flows from that because if you like they're two very different animals.

He goes on for what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? That is, the Christian way of life is concerned to live God's way with Jesus as our King where the model of right relating to God and others is Jesus adopting His morality living His way not our way.

[20 : 02] The person who doesn't know Christ doesn't share that concern in common. There may appear to be overlap in their life from time to time but there'll be key moments in which whatever King you serve will take you in one of two directions light or darkness God's way or our way and ultimately as Paul writes in verse 15 what agreement does Christ have with Belial or what does a believer share with an unbeliever where Belial there is a way of referring to the devil.

It's a shocking truth here I think that if all truth is God's truth then all lies are ultimately the devil's lies. to live without Jesus as your Lord and Saviour is not some sort of neutral state towards God no if you're not for Christ you're against Him.

Or living God's way might seem a bit constricting to you I'm not sure I think that one lie that has deceived many is that to submit to God is slavery and to be your own master your own God well that's what freedom's all about but it is a lie isn't it because if you've been redeemed rather if you haven't been redeemed by Christ you're still in a state of slavery being redeemed just means being bought out of slavery at a price slavery to sin the world and the devil if you're not redeemed you're still in slavery Paul in these verses you see wants the Corinthians to live out true freedom rather than to become enslaved again and that means that other religions are not well meaning attempts to know the unknowable they are the religion of rebels and ultimately again the lies of the devil so Paul's clincher his particular point of application for the Corinthians comes at the start of verse 16 what agreement is there between the temple of God as we'll see God's people in whom he dwells and idols well what will this then mean for us well for a start participating in the worship of another religion

I think is off limits depending on your background this will be harder or easier to do when I was at Monash Uni working there a friend of mine from a Chinese family really struggled with the ancestor worship that was so part of his culture the family expectation was that he would pray at the graves of his ancestors when he visited China he chose to go against that tradition for the sake of Christ occasionally at uni a Christian union may be asked to join in joint prayer times or services with non-Christian groups that's an offer that we politely decline this is clearly something that we should avoid if we want to be obedient to these words here I guess so despite our pluralistic society in our cities we're still more likely to have a church on every corner than a pagan temple as was the case in Corinth that may change but at the moment maybe secularism with its gods of self and wealth and human achievement maybe this is still the most predominant non-Christian religion if I can put it that way and I take it then that our values our view of money of why we work how we use our time how we view human life these things must be different to the prevailing culture and how we live must be noticeably different it's clear in this passage that morality is closely connected to theology that is the way we live grows out of the way we understand

God and our relationship to him so the theology of the temples in Corinth made involvement in temple prostitution for some people a way of life so what's the theology of our secularist neighbours well if God is there which he probably isn't but if he is he wants you to be happy and fulfilled that means if it's more fulfilling to be sexually involved with a number of people that's okay fudging the tax returns stretching the letter of the law to the absolute limit to squeeze out as much money from the government as we can well that's just accepted accounting practice these days if this child in my womb threatens my freedom I have a right to abort it no this is the darkness from which God's people have been delivered and please don't understand me clearly because everyone is fallen in sin this doesn't mean that every person is as bad as they possibly could be but as a Christian if the one supremely important thing in your life is that which an unbeliever denies well it's clear that there will often be times won't there where we must stand out from the world around us and not just go along with the flow so while at the beginning of verse 14 there it's not in the first place talking about marriage

[24 : 38] I think there is still an application it's clear isn't it that somebody who is already a Christian who decides to marry someone who isn't is making it more difficult for themselves to live for God and is sending mixed messages to their partner when you get married you're saying your lives are moving together now in the same direction you're sharing your whole lives now but if those lives are pulling in different directions it's a very difficult situation Paul is clear in this passage isn't he uncompromising as one writer has put it Christianity disturbs the status quo it challenges culture rather than just conforming to it it mixes up the pool of moral complacency rather than just flowing along with it or getting muddled up well Paul now hammers home why we are to be different why there can be no compromise with the world around us and it has to do with our new identity as God's people verse 16 for we are the temple of God of the living God as

God said I will live in them and walk among them and I will be their God and they shall be my people therefore come out from them and be separate from them says the Lord and touch nothing unclean then I will welcome you and I will be your father and you shall be my sons and daughters says the Lord Almighty since we have these promises beloved let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit making holiness perfect in the fear of God Paul says that we are the temple of the living God that is God now dwells amongst his people individually and collectively by his Holy Spirit we are the place where God dwells not in a building anymore but in a people God walked amongst his creation when he brought the world into being that intimacy was lost through our fall in sin we read about that in the second and third chapters of Genesis but now in Christ it's regained that yearning of the prophets for restored fellowship with God I will be their God and they will be my people and I will dwell with them this is fulfilled now for those who belong to God through faith in Christ therefore Paul says come out from them and be separate from them says the Lord and touch nothing unclean then I will welcome you and I will be your father and you shall be my sons and daughters says the Lord

Almighty now these are Old Testament quotes from the time in Israel's history when they were coming out of exile the judgment of God was ending they were being brought back and in the first quote from Isaiah 52 God addresses his exile people saying look come out from Babylon don't don't bring along some idols with you for a bit of spiritual insurance or something like that no touch no unclean things you go leave that way of life and those idols behind come out in the second from Ezekiel 20 God promises then to welcome home his people who'd been dispersed even as the father welcomed his prodigal son home in Jesus parable in in Luke 15 and in the third quote there is a promise that when they do this they will become God's sons and daughters they won't just be reluctantly accepted by God they'll have the privilege of being God's children with all of the blessings that that entails all this is fulfilled Paul says in those who come to God by faith in Christ who've been delivered from spiritual exile if you like see what

Paul's saying if the ultimate desecration of God's temple in the Old Testament was to put a pagan idol in there it's even worse for you God's holy temple his people to have anything to do with idols now no through Jesus death on the cross you've come through judgment you've been brought back to God so be who you are don't slip back into slavery don't just sort of melt back into the world in fact says Paul these things are promises God has made to you in the first place it's not about what we do for God but about what God has done for us so the last verse of our passage today since we have these promises beloved let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit making holiness perfect in the fear of God they are great promises and they tell us who God has made us to be in Christ a holy people set apart by God from the world for God it's quite striking when Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians even these guys if you read one

Corinthians some of the stuff they got up to you think how on earth can they still be called God's people but Paul addresses them as saints doesn't he says to the holy ones those made holy those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy that's what Paul's saying here you are holy you are saints therefore pursue holiness be who you have been saved to be be different to the world around you live in line with this new relationship that God has established with you through his grace in his son and in his death for you therefore having these promises beloved let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit perfecting or completing holiness in the fear of God Paul wants the Corinthians to grow into their true identity that is the calling of this passage on our lives to live out our true identity to be God's holy people for that is who we are the temple of the living God well I began today by talking about success we've seen though haven't we that whether we're talking about Paul or Christian ministers in general or all of

[30 : 29] God's people the more appropriate category is faithfulness trusting in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness for the power by his spirit to live in a new way that is different to the world around us claiming the promises God has made to us that by the gospel he does make us into a new people that bring glory to his name and living daily like it's not just words that we say but like it's the truth in chapter 6 verse 13 Paul wanted the Corinthians to open wide their hearts to receive the challenge of God's word to them and in whatever ways we're struggling to go against the flow to live a holy life for Jesus and it is a struggle daily isn't it well we need to receive God's word to us today to open wide our hearts to him in faith and with a desire to obey him as our Lord why don't we ask God to help us do just that let's pray together Father God passages like this in your word are so uncompromising so unbending and they often make us feel uncomfortable because you strike to the heart of our being you show us who we really are and yet Father in Christ you forgive us and you set us on a path where we can live in a new way different to the world around us where we become more and more like your son every day please keep changing us by your spirit and through your words so that we would become more like

Jesus so that we would not be ashamed of him or the life that he died and rose from the dead to bring us please help us to live this life faithfully and confidently and to do it in the power of your son the Lord Jesus we pray for his sake Amen Amen