

The Costliness of Ministry

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[0 : 00] I don't know if I'm allowed to say such things nowadays, but back in the day when I was still at school, I remember one of my teachers saying, he took our P lessons, also a maths and science teacher.

He was also, I think, the prefect master. This is a boys' school, by the way. And he started a judo club at school. Anyway, he used to have this mantra that said on the top of your outline, no pain, no gain.

Anyone familiar with that mantra? Anyone live by it? Anyway, the idea was that anything worth doing or learning involved pain or hardship or suffering.

In fact, he gave the impression that unless you started to feel the pain, you weren't making any progress. Now, of course, he was referring to things like physical training, like running, like doing weights in the gym.

But as we read our passage today, we may wonder if the Apostle Paul had the same philosophy. Of course, when we heard the passage read, it almost seemed with Paul like it's all pain and no gain.

[1 : 15] And if you recall, as we finished off in 2 Corinthians last year, where we left off, Paul in chapter 5 and 6 had been rather effusive about sharing the gospel.

He was really enthusiastic. The new covenant we now have, he said, is more glorious than the old covenant administered by Moses. Hence, he had great motivation to engage in ministry.

He was pumped to spread the message of reconciliation, where the world through Jesus Christ's death on the cross may be reconciled back to God, its creator.

But now we find that life and ministry hasn't been so easy. He suffered as a result. And the temptation was to give up, to not endure.

But Paul here says he's determined to press on. Why? Well, the reason he gives here in verse 3 to 4 is that he does not want to be a stumbling block.

[2 : 22] So that's point 1 of the outline, his reason for endurance. So he says in verse 3, 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 in great endurance. Paul will go on shortly to describe the many ways and various ways he's endured.

But if the glory of the gospel is the reason Paul went into ministry in the first place, here he gives the reason for sticking it out. It's so that he would not put a stumbling block in anyone's path.

Giving up, or the act of giving up, you see, is the stumbling block. First, it showed that the message of reconciliation was not important to sacrifice for.

If you give up, it showed that, yeah, this message is not worth, in one sense, dying for. But second, it undermines the message itself. Which at its heart, this message is about a saviour, Jesus, who made the ultimate sacrifice and endured great hardship, the greatest of which was to die on the cross, so that sinners could be saved.

[3 : 33] And so if those who carry the message wouldn't do the same, then what does that really say about the message? Now, we ought to realize here, though, that the hardship itself isn't the essential thing.

That is, we don't need to go out and look for hardship in order to demonstrate endurance, which then proves that the message is true. Rather, it's when hardships do arise, and we endure, that's the act that removes any stumbling block from others.

Paul, therefore, is not going out looking for hardship, but it's in how he responded when he did, when it did, that counts. Now, let me say also something about this idea of commendation here, which Paul speaks about in verse 4.

Now, recall that in, if you were back here last year, back in chapter 3 in verse 1, Paul had said that he didn't look to commend himself. You can see that on the slide. And yet here in verse 4, he seems to be talking about commending himself in every way.

So is there an inconsistency here? What is he going on? Well, Paul's, I think here, not concerned for his own reputation. So remember back in chapter 3, the idea was that he was not commending himself like the other ministers, so-called, who were waving letters of commendation.

[4 : 57] They were waving these letters that say, so-and-so, this big shot back in Jerusalem, he's saying that I'm kosher, and therefore you should listen to what I say. Rather, Paul here, when he talks about commending his ministry, is rather pointing back to the truth of his message itself.

He wants to commend the message, and therefore he's commending himself, in that sense, as a true bearer of that message. And so as we shall see throughout today, Paul's conduct and endurance, those are the things that commend the message, because his conduct and endurance rings true to the message, as I've started to already explain.

It's rather like, you know, politicians and world leaders, for instance. We don't like it, do we, when they say one thing and do another. And, you know, election campaign right on right now, you get to hear a lot of that, don't you?

And they're always saying the other party doesn't do what they say, don't they? There's never about them. So we ought not to be too critical, because I think we're all a bit guilty in that regard. But take, for example, the whole idea of climate change, for instance.

We see from time to time that all these leaders go to these big global climate change conferences, don't they? Now let me ask you, guess how do they actually get there most of the time?

[6 : 19] They take a plane, don't they? Of course. But do you know that one international flight equates to about half a year's worth of CO2 emission for an average Australian, thereabouts?

So you think, well, they're flying all the way there to tell us that CO2 emission is bad. We don't like it, right? They say one thing and they do another. But Paul is saying that that's not how he is.

He's showing by his own conduct that it rings true to his message, because he does not want his life to be a stumbling block to the message. And enduring and not giving up ensures that that's not a stumbling block.

In the same way, we talked, did we not, about last week that sometimes we lack the courage to share the gospel. And I said that that's understandable, humanly speaking. And if you're here today and you're not yet a Christian, I would expect that one thing you want us to do or Christians to do is that if we really believe the gospel, we wouldn't be afraid to promote it, would we?

If we really say that we love Jesus so much, then why would we be shy? Or why would we be afraid to put our reputation on the line for him?

[7 : 36] So can you see that having courage to speak the gospel is actually not putting a stumbling block to the gospel itself? Likewise, if Christians fail to be gracious or forgiving, again, that's a stumbling block, isn't it?

Because the gospel is all about God's forgiveness for people who don't deserve it. And so we're spreading that message and we ourselves are not gracious and forgiving, then we are putting a stumbling block to the gospel.

So Paul here is determined to endure in every way, no matter how much hardships he face, so as not to be a stumbling block to the message and to the people who hear the message.

And so as we move on to the next verses, Paul explains the variety of ways in which endurance is called for. So first in verse 4, he speaks of enduring despite internal pressures.

The three words he uses are troubles, hardships and distresses. And I think they refer to the emotional strain that arises, that kind of pressure from within that occurs when things get tough.

[8 : 41] The second list of six examples, I think describe external factors. So three relate to persecution, namely beatings, imprisonments and riots.

And Paul himself has personally faced all of these in his missionary trips. The next three, I think relate to general hardship, physical hardship, like hard work, sleepless nights and hunger.

And again, we know that Paul is likely to have had to support himself on his missionary journeys, earn his own money as he's preaching the gospel. And no doubt in his travels, there were probably times where he couldn't find shelter for the night or had to go without a hot meal even when he's hungry.

But again, he says, these things didn't stop him from going from place to place to share the gospel. But for Paul, endurance isn't just about resisting or facing hardships.

For him, in the next set of descriptions, it also required discipline to keep doing what's right. So in verse 6, we have the list that includes purity, understanding, patience and kindness, then in the Holy Spirit, in sincere love, in truthful speech and in the power of God.

[9 : 59] All these speak to persisting in righteousness even when things are hard. You can see that what it is, right? It is patience. Patience is about continuing to do what's right and holding out for what's good while we're waiting for a good outcome.

And all of us know, don't we, that when things get hard, the first thing that goes is our ability to do what's right, isn't it?

It's tempting for us to cut corners when it's tough. It's easy to be careless in how we speak to others or treat them when things are difficult for us.

But again, Paul is saying that that undermines the message of the gospel because purity and love are what the gospel is about. They reflect God's love for us. They reflect the way Jesus himself conducted his life, even in hardship.

Now, Paul includes in this list the Holy Spirit and the power of God. And when you first think about that, those are not virtues, are they? No, they're not because Paul includes them as things that are given to allow us to endure and do what's right.

[11 : 12] And that's interesting, isn't it? Because often when we imagine God's power, if I ask you to just close your eyes and think about having the Holy Spirit come upon you in power, I guess the image that often comes to mind is that when the Holy Spirit comes, what he does is he makes our life easier.

He takes away our problems and our difficulties. We imagine that the Holy Spirit almost makes us superhuman. But the fact that Paul includes it with the list of virtues helps us to realize that God's power is really for us to maintain purity and understanding, kindness and love, even in the midst of difficulties and weaknesses.

And that's why we have the title of the series and the theme of Paul's letter as such, God's Power in Human Weakness. It's not God's power to take away human difficulties and weakness, but to do that for God's power to continue to work in our weakness.

We often want God to change things externally, when often what God has in mind is to work in us internally to help us to endure, to maintain our righteousness, even when our external circumstances can't change or don't change.

And so I want to encourage you then that whenever we sometimes cry in our difficulties, where are you God when I need you? And we often do that, don't we?

[12 : 41] Lord, where are you? That actually, we ought to look inside rather than just outside. We need to see the situation with eyes of faith as to what's God doing to us and helping us, changing our character, rather than just look at how nothing is changing on the external.

And so that's why I think Paul goes on now in verse 7 and 8 to round out this list with three pairs of dichotomy, two opposites or extremes that encourage us to endure whatever the circumstance.

So first, we are to endure with weapons of righteousness, with the right hand and the left. And so the picture here is of a Roman soldier with weapons in both hands, but instead of the usual sword and shield, he's got righteousness in the left and the right.

And as humans, we only have two hands. Yes. So it signifies that when you're holding on with both the left and the right, your hands are full, aren't they?

That means when you are using these weapons, all you can do is do it in righteousness. All he can respond, Paul says, whether he's attacking or defending, is with the virtues of righteousness.

[14 : 01] And so the idea here is don't resort to evil to overcome your hardship, but rather endure in righteousness whatever the situation. And likewise, the next two phrases speak too of that same thing, of enduring through glory and dishonor, bad report or good report.

In other words, it's about enduring regardless of the situation or circumstance. And so whether people were praising Paul or believing in his preaching or whether they're rejecting him and criticizing him, he says, I will endure and press on.

And I'm pretty sure like us, Paul is impacted by negative feedback. I'm pretty sure that if he went into a city and people believed his message, he would be stoked.

He would say, yes, ministry is just worth doing. I'll do it every day of the week. But when all of a sudden he gets negative criticism, I'm sure that he can get discouraged as well.

And he may even start to think, oh no, is this worth going on with? Am I really cut out for this? But, Paul does also realize, and that's why he writes here, he just realizes how fickle human emotions are, including his own.

[15 : 18] It doesn't take much, does it? And you can know for yourself to go from cloud nine on any given day to the pits. Right? You wake up, you think, oh, this is going to be a great day, and all it takes is one small little thing, and suddenly you've had a really bad day.

The most shocking day of your week, or something like that. And that's true for all of us, isn't it? It doesn't matter how, you know, mature or seasoned as Christians we are. So that would be the case for Paul as well.

But for Paul, he knows that for him, and for us, true success is not measured through our circumstances or through the reaction of the world, but rather, it's to be measured through God's eyes.

And often, God's view of success is opposite to the world's. You only have to look at Jesus' own example. His death was seen as a failure in the world, and yet to God, he was doing perfectly, exactly, what God had in mind for his purpose and plan.

So much so that Jesus is embodied as the suffering servant, which we re-read again from Isaiah 53. And it states in verse 12 that very thing, that after his suffering, he will enjoy God's reward.

[16 : 33] So, as it's on the screen, it says, Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, that's the suffering bid, and was numbered with the transgressors, for he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

There's a risk in ministry, isn't there? And then there's God's reward. And this is the same equation that Paul experienced in his own ministry. In verses 8 to 10, he lists this, he lists how differently the reality is from what the world sees of him, and the reality of what God sees of him.

In God's eyes, he says, he's genuine, and yet, in the world, they see him as imposter. To God, he's known, and yet, others think him unknown, a no-name, no-reputation preacher.

In the next few comparisons, the order is flipped. He names what the world sees him first, dying, beaten, sorrowful, poor, and having nothing. All signs of failure, isn't it?

And yet, what's the reality? It's on the other side of the equation. He lives on with the life of Christ. He's not killed, even though beaten. He's sustained by God.

[17 : 52] Yes, his ministry brings sorrow, yet deep down, there's a constant joy, always rejoicing, burning within him, because he knows he's serving the living God. He's poor, he says, and yet, he's making many rich.

Rich, not with material blessings, but eternal and spiritual riches. And so, like those he's preaching to, he possesses everything. He's abundantly rich in Christ Jesus.

So, the list really is saying that outwardly, there are many risks and signs of failure, but inwardly, there is much reward. And as we go on to the last three verses, which is sort of a hinge between this passage and the next weeks, Paul names one final risk.

And I summarize it on the outline with the same pattern that Paul used, that of giving and yet not receiving. It sort of doesn't quite fit the pattern because that whole phrase is only of risk, not of the reward.

But it's sort of, I think it sort of works, so just go with me. But Paul says, in his own words, we have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. Literally, it means Paul's mouth and heart are open to them.

[19 : 06] We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us as a fair exchange. Come on, guys, fair trade. I speak as to my children.

Open wide your hearts also. The risk here that Paul is talking about is that he's putting all his affections, he's pouring his life into the Corinthians.

He's giving. He's making himself vulnerable to them. And yet, it seems he's not receiving their love in return. They're withholding their love. Why? Well, we can gather from the letter it's because Paul has had to rebuke them.

And therefore, they have been reluctant to repent of their sin. And so, they're keeping him at arm's length. But here, you see how costly this is for Paul. And that's what it is like for ministry, isn't it?

It's not like we just share the gospel or we just serve others and, you know, whether you take it or not doesn't matter. It doesn't affect us. No, when we serve, the outcome of what people do and their lives matter to us, doesn't it?

[20 : 12] And here, Paul can see that even though he himself is safe, the Corinthians' own salvation is at risk. And so, he cares deeply for them. And he asks for this fair exchange that is, I've invested deeply in your faith.

Now, open your hearts also. And the idea here is not so much that, oh, you know, I just come and give Paul a bear hug and all be forgotten kind of thing. That's not the kind of fair exchange he's talking about.

When he asks for opening of their hearts, he's really saying, heed what I'm saying and open your hearts to repentance. The key thing is not the affection, it's the repentance.

And if the repentance comes, so will the affection follow. Paul is more interested in the repentance than the effect of it, which is the affection. Now, we don't know by reading the letter whether the Corinthians did respond or not because the letter doesn't say so.

And again, that's the thing with ministry, isn't it? There is a risk that we pour our lives into others, into the work of ministry, and we may not get the success we're looking for. That's just the reality.

[21 : 18] We have hard conversations, we sit for long hours with people, but we may not get the outcome that we desire. There's no guarantee in that sense of success or reward when we serve in ministry.

And as a result, that can be heartbreaking, can't it? Now, if you're here and not a Christian here tonight, and you feel sometimes that we're too zealous when we're trying to share with you because we seem to care too much and want to see you come to know the Lord, well, this is the reason for it.

it's not that we're trying to force you to believe in Jesus, but it's rather that we love you dearly and care for your eternal salvation. Now, for those of us, however, on the other side who pour our hearts into it, then let's be comforted to know that even Jesus didn't always succeed, did he?

After all, Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve, and he didn't repent. And not everyone who saw him after he was raised from the dead believed either. We all love to see our hard work pay off, don't we?

And Helen talked about all the stuff that she's done where she likes to see a payoff for. And it's the same with ministry. And sometimes we might say, oh God, if only you can assure us of success, then I'm willing to endure any pain for you.

[22 : 41] That's what we'd like for God to assure us, isn't it? But again, there's no such promise, is there? Instead, there's only an assurance and comfort that God knows, and our reward will be in heaven.

There's no guarantees of rewards here or results here, but there will be a guarantee of God's love and assurance and reward in heaven. And so I think what it comes down to me, for me, is that while it's important to remember that when we serve, we're serving the ones, people, ultimately, the one we serve most of all is God.

And that's why in verse 4, back there, Paul remembers who he is. We're servants of God, first and foremost. Yes, we endure for the sake of not putting a stumbling block for others, the ones we serve, but even if they don't heed the message, we remember to endure for the sake of the one we serve.

We're Christ's ambassadors. And God is making his appeal through us. We're serving him. We're his representatives. Now friends, some of you may be new as Christians or haven't done much ministry, but if you desire to serve God, then I hope you heard me right tonight.

Ministry is costly. If you want to serve God, it will cost you. We probably wouldn't suffer to the same extent as Paul did, even though we may feel like it sometimes.

[24 : 14] But ministry is not always meant to be easy. So I might as well tell you that and just get you to get over that right up the front. But if you serve God long enough, then let me assure you, you will be called to endure.

Sooner or later, you'll be tempted to quit. So be prepared now and remember why you're doing it. Now for others, and I speak especially to the young men, please don't hear these as, okay, we then need to be gung-ho with our ministry, right?

Be like my PE teacher, the more pain, the more gain. No, that's not what Paul is teaching here. God has called us to be ministers, not martyrs, not messiahs.

What Paul describes here is not prescriptive for us. So we do need to give wisdom to pace ourselves for the long haul. No one is right to rest and to say no and to do what's within our limit or not beyond our limit.

But having said that, there will be times that even as we do that, we will still face hardship. And when we do, that's when we are called to endure. We endure with the knowledge that the reality is not what we see with the naked eye.

[25 : 35] But like what Paul says in verse 8 to 10, that our ministry is genuine, even when others think otherwise. That God knows what we're doing, even when others won't.

That outwardly, we may be dying, and yet we're living on by the Holy Spirit. We're beaten, and yet God preserves us. We're sorrowful, weighed down by the burdens of ministry, and yet always rejoicing because of the message.

Poor, yet making many rich. having nothing, and yet possessing everything. Why? Because God is with us by His Spirit to help us endure.

And so friends, if you are finding ministry hard at the moment, and I know that when we get into winter, it always seems harder than not, then take comfort that God is with us. He may not change our external circumstances, but He's at work certainly to be changing us so that we endure and rejoice and look to our final reward when we meet Him.

Let's pray. Father, give us all a desire to serve You and to be ministers of the Gospel. Thank You that Jesus Himself suffered the cross and endured the shame for our salvation.

[26 : 56] By Your Spirit, help us to endure in every way so that we don't put a stumbling block in the path of those who are to believe, but that we serve the living God.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.