

Be Confident in Christian Ministry

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[0 : 00] Good morning, St. Silas. Happy New Year, and Happy New Year at home if you're watching. Thanks, Linney, for reading. It's not straightforward, is it? Let's pray, let's ask for God's help as we turn to this portion of his word. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this opportunity to engage with who you are, Lord. And even in this portion of your word, we see our dependence on your spirit to see you clearly.

So we ask, Father God, would your spirit open our eyes, open our ears to hear your word, open our minds to understand, and open our hearts that we might accept it and change and follow you.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, yeah, this morning in a new year, as Rob said, we're starting a new sermon series, a little bit overdue. I'm really excited because I wanted us to look at this book, 2 Corinthians, a year ago, just as we headed into lockdown, and we kind of shifted what we were teaching because of what was going on around us. So we're a bit overdue coming to 2 Corinthians.

But folks, this is deep end Bible stuff, yeah? It's mind-stretching, it's hard work, but brilliantly rewarding. And we're going to hear in this letter that Paul, the apostle, wrote to this church in Corinth, what he does is he sort of lifts up the bonnet on Christian ministry.

[1 : 37] It's as though he stops the car, he lifts up the bonnet, and he says, let me show you why I do what I do so that you understand. And because he sets it out like that, ever since then, it's become, in a way, a bit of a model that we can use to hold up against any Christian ministry and think, how does it compare with the apostle Paul?

Paul did that because he's got a very troubled relationship with this church in Corinth that he planted. As you read the letter, it sometimes feels like you've walked in on an embarrassing marriage row between a husband and a wife, and you think, oh, this is awkward, what's gone on here?

There was a song by Brian May in the 90s that I used to like, where he sang to this woman, you know, I love you, but you drive me crazy. You know, I love you, but you drive me crazy.

And I think that Paul could have said that about the church in Corinth. It's obvious that he loves them. He's not given up on them, but they are driving him mad. And he just mentions at the beginning there the anguish he's in in ministry because he doesn't know how they're doing. He's waiting for news about them. And you think, why doesn't Paul just give up? This is the fourth letter he's written to them. We only have two of them in the Bible, so that's why it's 2 Corinthians.

But we know from what he refers to in the letters, this is at least the fourth one. He's also visited them, and he's found that when he visited them, there are people in leadership in the church standing against Paul. And to make matters worse, a group of what he calls in chapter 11, super apostles have arrived. They look very similar to the apostles, the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection who were establishing the early church. The super apostles look similar, but they're subtly different in their message about the Christian life and in their ministry. And it's seductive, and it's drawing them in. We're going to hear more about them as we go through the series. But that puts the church in Corinth in great danger. Are they going to stick with Paul and his model of ministry in the Christian life, or are they going to fall for the counterfeit? So it's a book that compels us to think about the kind of church God calls us to be. What kind of church are we going to be at St.

[4 : 11] St. Silas? And it helps us work out what we're looking for from a church. And it's important for each of us as we think about the ministries that we're each involved in. Each one of us is in ministry. Ministry is not just about the kind of the one overall church leader that you kind of, there's a kind of model, isn't there, that almost you pay one person and they do ministry, and everyone else just comes and watches. But the New Testament, everyone's involved in ministry.

And so we think about our own ministry as we look at Paul's. And it's a great thing to look at this passage if you're someone who feels in a little bit of ministry fatigue as we come to a new year. As you think about all the ways you've invested yourself in serving Christ, maybe last year, maybe for years, maybe for decades. And you look ahead at the new year and you think, I just don't think I can go through with that again. All the time, all the energy, all the skills, preparing stuff, going out on a limb, speaking to friends, speaking at church for people.

I just don't know whether I can do it anymore. And you might look back at years of gospel sacrifice and think, what have we got to show for it? Where are all the teenagers who, year after year, went on the SU holiday that I went to help on every summer and gave up annual leave for? Where are all the young people who, when I've spent every week, every Friday night at a Friday night youth group, where have all the young people gone? Where have they gone off to? Or maybe you're someone on the edges of St. Silas, and you're not yet fully involved, and you're wondering, is this really where I want to be? And why does this church do things in the way that we do them? Maybe I should find another church that's a bit more impressive.

So we pick things up, and Paul here, in this morning's passage, he shares three reasons why we should feel very confident in authentic Christian ministry, so that we feel confident to stick with the message we've heard about Jesus and feel confident in bringing that message to other people prayerfully and lovingly. Three reasons to feel confident. And the first one is it's a victorious ministry. As we preach Christ, we join the parade. Hopefully the points will come on the screen there. It's a victorious ministry. As we preach Christ, we join the parade. So just have a look with me at verse 14. Paul says, but thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession, and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of Him everywhere. Now in the Roman Empire, when a commander won a great battle, they'd be granted the great honor of a victory parade in Rome.

[7 : 13] In fact, last year, one of the books I read was a fictional novel by Robert Harris. He's written this trilogy, Robert Harris, set in the Roman Empire. And during this novel, Imperium, his first one, there's actually a, this really comes into play because there's a Roman general, and he's beaten off some barbarians somewhere who'd captured a portion of the Roman Empire. And he's come back, and his entire army are camped out for months outside Rome because he's saying, we're not going in until you grant me the honor of a victory parade. That was the thing he wanted, to come in to the fanfare and applaud. So picture yourself as a citizen of Rome in the first century on the day of one of these things. It was called a pompa triumphalis. I don't do Latin, but that's what it was, a pompa triumphalis. And the barbarians, imagine, the barbarians have invaded part of the Roman Empire, and some general's gone off, and he's won it back. And you arrive for the victory parade, and the crowds line the streets, and there's music, and there's food. And then what happens is first in the procession would come this group carrying pictures of the battle, and names of places that this army had liberated. And then some bulls would come through. They're on their way to be sacrificed. It's bad news for the bulls. They're on their way to, you know, Jupiter or someone, some temple. Then you get some of the people who've been defeated, some of the barbarians who've been captured. That's bad news for them as well. They're going to face execution. Then you got this group of incense bearers, and what they do is they waft across the crowds a great cloud of strong-smelling smoke.

And then just after them comes the man himself, the general, at the heart of the parade, taking the honor that's his due, the kind of the maximus character. After that, you get a group of Romans who have been liberated by the conquest, and they get their day in Rome to say, this is great. We've got our towns back. And then last of all, the general's own soldiers would march in to cheers of delight at what they've done. That's the picture that the Apostle Paul uses here to describe Christian service, the Christian life, Christian ministry. Now, of course, the triumphant commander is Christ. He gets the honor and the glory. He saw his people enslaved to sin and death, his world. People living their lives captive to sin and facing condemnation for their sin and living our whole lives in fear of death because of sin. So by his death, resurrection, ascension, Jesus has conquered sin and death, and he's rescued his people to be free so that we can be with him forever. So it's all about him, this parade, and then people disagree about what Paul means we are in the parade. I think what Paul wants us to see is that when we engage in Christian ministry, we're like the incense bearers of the procession. He's telling us the heart of the ministry is in verse 12. He tells us what he does in verse 12. He went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ. That's to preach the momentous

news of who Jesus is and what he did. That's what Paul does. He travels the world, spreading the news that Jesus is God's victorious rescuing king. Turn to him and you'll be saved. In verse 17, he says it again. He says, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ, we speak before God with sincerity as those sent from God.

It's a speaking work, spreading the word about the saving work of Jesus, that he died for sins and he rose to rule. So ministry isn't just something that the pastor does. It's something we're all involved with as we speak about Jesus to each other, to encourage each other, and we speak about Jesus to not yet believing friends. And as we do that, we take that equivalent role of the incense bearers in that procession, wafting the aroma of this great victory. It can feel so unimpressive speaking God's word in the hope that it helps someone grow up to be more like Jesus. It feels really unimpressive.

You know, you turn up to lead a children's ministry group and you've thought of a game and you've brought a craft and the kids arrive and you speak to them about Jesus and they go on their way. And once you've found all the lids for the felt tips and you've put everything back in the cupboard, you think, what have I got to show for it? Was it really worth it? And Paul's point is, when you do that, you're part of the victory parade for the world. Those words that you spoke to those children, they're not just trivial words. They're not just news round or Blue Peter.

[12:55] We're spreading news about a great victory of a king who has come to win the battles we could never win. And we pass that on to the next generation, that that victory is the only hope for our world.

And notice from the picture that we don't have to win the battle anymore. Of course, we're weak people. We can't beat sin and we can't beat death, but we don't have to because Jesus has done it. And we're just part of the victory parade, spreading the news of what he has already done.

The battle has been won. And it's good to remember this picture so that we're not destabilized when we hit different responses to that message. Look at the way Paul presses the picture in verse 15.

For we are to God, the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one, we are an aroma that brings death. To the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? So the picture warns us there that when we step into ministry, we have to prepare to be Marmite. People are going to either love us or hate us. When that incense was wafted at the Roman victory parade, the crowds who smelt it, they'd smell the incense and they'd think victory. That's the smell of victory. I love these parades. Our empire is winning. The barbarians who'd been captured, who were on their way to execution, who were on their way to execution, they smell that smell. And for them, it's the smell of death. It's the smell of defeat, of condemnation, because they stood against the victorious general. And when we pass on the news that Jesus is God's saving king for the world, some people will receive it gladly and turn to him and find life. Others, deep down, really don't want Jesus to be king because the bottom line is we don't want to change. And so the message becomes an aroma of death to people. It's the same message but received very differently. And if we speak to someone about Jesus and they get really angry with us, it might be, it might be that we haven't done anything wrong in our manner and in our words. Just that to them, it's the aroma of death. This is the great paradox about being a Christian. It should be, it should be that when people think about people from St. Silas

Church in our local community or in our workplace where we're known as a Christian, that they think of us Christians as some of the kindest people they know. People who are other person-centered, who are sacrificial in our love and generosity, and yet some of them will be deeply offended by what we believe about Jesus. Even though it's what we believe about Jesus that has led in some way to that kindness and love, they are deeply offended by what we think about him because it's the stench of death to them. So that's our first point. It's a victorious ministry. As we preach Christ, we join the parade. But if we're not sold on the idea of smelling like death to some people, our second reason to stick with the ministry is this. It's a transforming ministry. As we preach Christ, the Spirit gives life. Now here, the super apostles come in who have arrived in Corinth.

[16:43] They're all about letters of accreditation. They're all about being able to show that they are the, they should be listened to. They've got recommendations from other places, other churches, qualifications, letters after their name. They're visibly impressive. It's a bit like we might think today about celebrities, you know, this kind of cult of celebrity. People want to listen to the famous.

So the church is wondering, well, where's Paul's letter of recommendation? And he tells them in chapter three, verse two, just have a look down there. You yourselves are our letter written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. So he's saying, I don't need a letter of recommendation because I love you and it's written on my heart. His love for them is his accreditation. And then he talks about their hearts. Look at verse three. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. What's he saying? He's saying the message about Jesus that we brought to you, it's changed you, hasn't it? It's, you can see it on your heart. It's transformed your life. It's stirred up in you a love for God and a love for each other that wasn't there before. That's how you became a church. That's how you joined the church. And someone else can have as many letters after their name as they want. They can have, you can have a book on the Amazon bestsellers list.

You can be regularly on the TV. It's when people hear about God through Christ being proclaimed to them in the scriptures that the Holy Spirit changes hearts. That's how God works in hearts. It's powerful. It's transforming. You want to be reminded how powerful it is? Look at the effect it's had in your own life. That's what Paul's saying to them, isn't it? Could we do that? Can't many of us do that? I know I'm not the person that I should be, but the Word of God about Christ has completely changed the course of my life since someone brought that to me. It's transforming. [19:06] Paul then illustrates how powerful it is by turning to a man who really did have a glorious ministry. No doubt about that. It was Moses. He was the man chosen to go up Mount Sinai when God's people had been rescued and they were camped at the bottom of the mountain. Moses was the man. He went up the mountain, thunder, lightning, earthquakes. God shows up. He receives the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone and that was the set of promises or the covenant that established the relationship between God and his people at that time. And after that, Moses continued meeting with God. He used to go to this tent of meeting as the Israelites were encamped. He'd go in the tent and when he came out, he had to wear a veil because his face was radiant, supernaturally radiant from having been in the presence of God.

It was glorious to be Moses. Imagine how confident Moses must have felt about his ministry as he spent his life with a veil over himself because people couldn't look at the radiance. You want impressive?

Look at him. But ultimately, where did that get the Israelites? They worshipped a golden calf and said, that's what rescued us, not God. And they turned to other gods and they were condemned. So look at verse 6 as Paul makes the point. Verse 6, He, God, has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. And then if you look down at verse 8, he says, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brought condemnation, that was Moses' ministry, was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness? And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts? It's a bit like, what he's doing here is a bit like, you know, all the fuss about Jupiter and Saturn coming together before Christmas. I don't know whether you saw it. I called the family out one dusk because you could see it in the sky just over to the southwest in Glasgow on a clear evening. And these two really bright celestial bodies, Jupiter and Saturn. And it was glorious to see in the sky. But the next day, no one's looking for it. As soon as the sun comes up, you can't see it. And you could say, well, that was glorious what we saw last night.

[21:44] But doesn't it just show how glorious the sun is? The sun has surpassed the glory of those planets. And that's what Paul's doing here with the ministry of Moses. He's bigging it up, saying, look how glorious it was.

It's now been surpassed, overtaken, because of what we now have is what the Holy Spirit uses as the Holy Spirit goes into people's hearts and breathes life, and they get given eternal life instead of condemnation forever. It's good to remember how glorious the new covenant is for ourselves in the new year, when we might have all kinds of books we want to read and goals we want to set ourselves and people we want to listen to. Maybe you've heard about a podcast that you want to listen to, whatever it might be. Paul says, remember how your heart was changed when you heard the simple old, old story about Jesus. The true power for your personal transformation and for the salvation of others is still in that message. God's Word about Christ.

Stick with it. Keep sharing it. But how does that ministry change others, and how will it change us this year? How will it transform us?

Well, that's our third point. It's a glorious ministry. As we preach Christ, the veil is lifted. We just heard about a veil, didn't we? Moses had to wear a veil because it would cover the glory of God in his face. But Paul says there's actually another veil when we hear God's Word. Without the Holy Spirit's help, even when the Word of God was read, as it was in the temple and the synagogues at the time, people couldn't see the glory of God. Verse 14. Have a look. Verse 14, he says, but their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. He's talking there about Israel, about the Jewish people, that they couldn't see God's glory. They had this veil over their hearts. We experience the same problem today all around us when it comes to seeing God. The Bible tells us that we should be able to see the glory of God from what he's made. It says it in the Bible that the heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim his handiwork. But we do cosmology and astronomy and astrophysics and we say, what do people say? There's no God. It just sprang from nothing. We should be able to see from ourselves, from the incredible life of humanity, that there's a God who made us. It reveals to us God.

[24 : 47] But what do people do? We do biology and chemistry and we say we're just byproducts of impersonal forces, complex survival machines. You know, the human consciousness is an incredible thing.

How did it happen? But it's just happened. We don't see that there's a God when we should. And it's true, even when we hear God's words in the Bible, we think they're just human thoughts.

It's just people writing stuff, searching after God. So the Bible gets read all over the place, in university lecture halls, in synagogues, even in churches, and people are left completely cold.

They can't see God's glory. Naturally, that's the way we all are because of the way our hearts are. Our hearts are naturally turned away from God and we're left unable to see Him. That's the veil over our hearts. We're in the dark about God. And then look at verse 16.

But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, of being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. That's the only hope we have of seeing God. It looks so unimpressive, doesn't it?

[26 : 22] One person standing at the front of a church building with a Bible speaking about Christ. One member of a church inviting their friend to go on the life course with them.

Arranging a Zoom call to read the word one-to-one with a friend, just going through John's gospel. It's so underwhelming. It's so unimpressive. Paul says, when that goes on and people put their faith in Jesus, when they trust Him, the Spirit opens their eyes and they see God. They see God Himself. The glorious, uncreated, Creator God is revealed to us through that ordinary means. And hopefully, again, we can point to that experience in our own lives, that through Jesus we've come to know God, to see the brilliance of God in the person of Jesus. If you can't yet, if you can't yet say that's true of you, then would you be willing to accept that you depend on God for that, that you need God's help?

That's what it's saying, that fundamentally we need God's help to see God. And so we can ask Him, ask for God by His Spirit to help you see Him as you look at Jesus.

And for us who can see the glory of God in Jesus, Paul connects that with our transformation, with our growing to maturity, looking more like Jesus. So Moses went into the tent and he came out with his face radiant. And for us, when we spend time with Jesus, He rubs off on us.

We grow to be more like Him. He's glorious, Jesus. But it is glory in weakness. It's glory in loving sacrifice. It's glory in the mind of Christ that valued others above Himself and depended on God as He went to the cross to save people. It's God at work in apparent weakness. That's the glory that rubs off on us as we spend time with Him. So folks, this is why it's worth lining up your goals for this year behind sharing God's Word about Christ. It's a victorious ministry. He's won the battles.

[28 : 41] He's a saving King. So as we preach Christ, we're just spreading that news. We join the parade. It's a transforming ministry. People around us are lost. They're looking for hope, for change.

They're setting New Year's resolutions that they'll never be able to keep. But as we preach Christ, the Holy Spirit gives life and He gives freedom and He changes people's hearts. And it's a glorious ministry. As we preach Christ, God lifts the veil from people's hearts so they can see God Himself in

all His brilliance as they look at Jesus. So let's stick with that ministry. It's the ministry that saved us and it's the ministry that we can give ourselves to to save others. Let's pray together.

We praise You, Lord Jesus, that You are the victorious one, risen and ascended, the same yesterday, today and forever. Thank You for the extraordinary, wonderful purpose You give for our own lives, that we can join the parade, and that as people hear of You, Your Spirit gives freedom and life, that the veil is taken from hearts and they can see the glory of God in Your face.

So Father, may we join the parade as a church in this new year, spreading the aroma of Christ, pleasing You, and may that message be received by many as the aroma of life this year.

Father, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing in our hearts, if you're here, in response to God's Word, and sing out loud at home as Greg and Sarah and Tom lead us.