

We Forget the Miracle of Ministry

Confession # 17

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Text: 2 Corinthians 10:12-18

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Series: Confessions of an Imperfect Church (2 Corinthians)

Introduction: Open your Bible to 2 Corinthians 10. We are continuing our series through the book of 2 Corinthians entitled, “Confessions of an Imperfect Church”. And like the imperfect church at Corinth, we have a long way to go in our growing and changing in Christ.

Today’s confession is this: “We Forget the Miracle of Ministry”.

What’s Wrong with the World?

“When a newspaper posed the question, ‘What’s Wrong with the World?’ G. K. Chesterton reputedly wrote a brief letter in response: ‘Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely Yours, G. K. Chesterton.’ That is the attitude of someone who has grasped the message of the Jesus.”¹ It is a miracle that any good thing happens through any one of us! I truly mean that. The godly fruit of ministry are a miracle. They are a gift from God. Would you thank Him for all you have right now?

By the Grace of God...

Sometimes we mourn because we want to be more for God’s kingdom. We want to do more. Sometimes it is easy to be saddened and even depressed because our longing is so great, but our results are so little. When I become this way I remind myself of the words of John Newton. He said:

“I am not what I ought to be — ah, how imperfect and deficient! I am not what I wish to be — I abhor what is evil, and I would cleave to what is good! I am not what I hope to be — soon, soon shall I put off mortality, and with mortality all sin and imperfection. Yet, though I am not what I ought to be, nor what I wish to be, nor what I hope to be, I can truly say, I am not what I once was; a slave to sin and Satan; and I can heartily join with the apostle, and acknowledge, “By the grace of God I am what I am.”

What does God think of your work for Him? It doesn’t matter if you or someone else pats you on the back for your labor. What matters is that one day you will be commended by God!

Paul knew this. He was dealing with some very proud, and very lost men who had taken over the church at Corinth.

¹ Timothy Keller. *The Prodigal God*, 46.

Warren Wiersbe asked this question: “If the work of the church is the work of God, and if the work of God is a miracle, how do we go about measuring a miracle?”²

I. The **Blunders** of ministry (vs. 12).

2 Corinthians 10:12 (ESV) — “**Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.**”

Explanation: Paul had spent almost two years planting the church in Corinth. Yet not long after he departed, false teachers, Judaizers, who were bringing in both legalism and hedonism into the church, began to denounce Paul. These Judaizers covered their sinful antinomianism with legalism. They had everything right on the outside – in fact they were very impressive. They were truly “wolves in sheep’s clothing”. In fact in the next chapter Paul is going to say that they are like Satan in the way they can deceive, “masquerading as angels of light”. They looked great! They majored on the externals.

- They had many who commended them with letters.
- They had a high level of education.
- They had a fantastic eloquence, and could communicate well, and sounded reasonable.
- They had numbers, and seemed to show an outward appearance of fruit.
- But they were **fake**. What they were doing was not from God. They were like the professor in the wizard of oz who was making a great show, but was nothing more than a **hoax**.

A. It is a great mistake to measure our ministry by external **human** standards. What matters is not what others think of you but what God thinks of you.

Yet men will always invent man-made human measuring sticks. We are not to be conformed to the image of any man or ministry. We are to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

It really doesn’t matter how great people think you are. What does God think of you?

B. Consider the Jesus’ **evaluation** of the seven churches in the book of the Revelation. In His personal examination of the seven churches named in Revelation 2–3, the Lord Jesus measured them far differently than they measured themselves.

- The church that thought it was poor, He considered to be rich (Rev. 2:8–11). He said to the church at Smyrna, “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich).”

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (2 Co 10:12). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

- But the church that boasted of its wealth, He declared to be poor. He said to the church at Laodocia, “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen” (Rev. 3:16–22).³

C. **Specific** blunders in ministry.

The false teachers at Corinth had become GURUS of church growth strategy. They were improving on the Gospel. They were tampering with the Word of God and watering it down. They boasted in what they had done – boasting in the outward, and measuring everything by externals.

1. The blunder of **numbers**. Don’t get me wrong. It is not that God is not interested in numbers. He records in Acts 2 that 3000 were saved at Pentecost and in Acts 4 that 5000 additional were saved around Jerusalem.

But just because millions of people do something doesn’t make it true. Billions have been Catholics. Billions are religious Muslims. Consider the Mormons (14 million), or the JW’s (12 million).

2. The blunder of religious **culture**. Again, don’t get me wrong, God is interested in our culture, and when lives are transformed from the inside, their external culture radically changes.

But, religious culture does not necessarily mean that God is at work. People can be attending faithfully and be religious and God have absolutely nothing to do with them.

- Consider **Saul of Tarsus** who according to the Law was blameless.
- **John Wesley** was at one time culturally religious, but lost. Upon returning from preaching to the Indians in America, he wrote in his journal on 24th January 1738:

“Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled.” He said, **“I went to America to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me?”**
- Consider all the billions who have a culture of religion and morality.
 - **Mormons** are very nice culturally religious people, but they know not the Lord of glory.

³ Ibid.

- **Roman Catholics** can be very culturally religious people. The cults are disciplined in their religion. But they know not the Lord.
 - Many people in **evangelical churches** are culturally religious but aside from praying over their food and going to church, they have almost no walk with Jesus Christ.
 - According to Jesus, **multitudes of pastors and Christian workers** have no walk with Christ at all. At the Great Day of Judgment, they will be exposed for their double life. He will say, “Depart from me you workers of lawlessness, I never knew you” (**Matt. 7:23**).
3. The blunder of emotional **experience**. The Mormon’s believe one sign of salvation is what they call “the burning of the bosom” – it is an emotional and religious experience. This is what they base the work of God on. Many charismatics base their salvation on emotional experiences. If they feel good they must have met God.

All of these are man-made standards. We can have thousands of people attending our assemblies, but if what we are promoting is not the glorious Cross – the Old Rugged Cross, then what are we attracting. We can be attracting myriads of people, but why are they coming.

It is very dangerous to compare ourselves by external man-made human standards. “**we dare [not] ... classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves**” (vs. 12). Just because I say God is doing something among us, doesn’t make it true.

Paul says those who measure themselves by their own human standards and compare themselves by it are “WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING”.

They don’t understand how God measures ministry.

- D. God’s work is that of **repentant faith** in the heart-the inner man. The proof that God is at work is a heart that’s been transformed and humbled by the grace of God in Christ. The blazing center of their life is Christ. They can say, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (**Phil. 1:21**).

II. Our **Boundary** in ministry (vs. 13-14). Our boundaries of ministry are set by God.

- A. Since our sphere of ministry is a gift, we should be **humble** (vs. 13; 1 Cor. 4:7).

Verse 13, “But we will not boast beyond limits [OF OUR OWN LABOR], but will boast only with regard to the area [REALM] of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you.”

Paul said earlier in **2 Corinthians 4:1** (ESV) — “Therefore, **having this ministry by the mercy of God**, we do not lose heart.”

Paul said in **1 Corinthians 4:7** (ESV) — “For who sees anything different in you? [*i.e.* “*What makes you so special?*”] What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”

Paul and the Corinthians

God assigns our “area of influence” in ministry. And for Paul, this included the Corinthians. Paul spent almost two years among the Corinthians.

God Needs No One

False teachers act as if they own the world. They act as if the world can’t go on without them. I remember twenty years ago when a minister in Hammond Indiana was in the midst of a scandal. Accusations came out, but the thing that disturbed me was this man’s pride. He said, “God needs me”.

Listen, God doesn’t need anyone. Paul didn’t have a high view of himself.

B. Since our sphere of ministry is a gift, we should be **confident** (vs. 14; Phil. 1:6).

2 Corinthians 10:14 (ESV) — “**For we are not overextending ourselves**, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ.”

These Corinthians were fighting with Paul. But God had transformed them through Paul’s ministry. Paul was stating the obvious. It’s going to be hard for you to deny the legitimacy of my ministry, since you came to Christ through me.

But Paul was **confident** in God. If these people were truly saved, God would bring His work in them to completion. If they were truly Christians, they would reject the false teachers.

If what you are doing is God’s work, you can be confident that what God begins, he will bring to completion. Paul said it this way in **Philippians 1:6** (KJV) — “**Being confident of this very thing**, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

All ministry is a miracle. God gives us the boundaries of our ministry. He sends people to us. He draws them. He saves them.

- Are you discouraged about a friend or loved one? If they are saved God will complete the work in them. Don’t be afraid to tell them the

truth. Don't sugar coat it. If they are saved they will respond. If they are lost God can awaken them. It's God who does the work.

- Are you faithful in the ministry God has given you?

Conclusion: Ministry is a miracle! It's amazing that God uses any one of us. Are you being used of God? Are you doing God's work in God's way?

- Are you a faithful member of Christ's church, serving Him until He comes?
- Are you bearing fruit?
- If Jesus came right now, would He find you bearing fruit in your family, in your church, in this world?

Tonight we'll look at the "Blessing" and the "Boasting" of our ministry for Christ. But let me close with by relating to you a story.

As we close I want to share with you a story about a very interesting well-educated Greek philosopher whose name is Dr. Alexander Popaderos. And Dr. Popaderos every summer on the island of Crete taught a class on ethics for two weeks. And this particular summer just as he was getting ready to close the class, the last few minutes of the class, he said, "Now are there any questions before we go?" And just as he was getting ready to say, "OK then you're dismissed," a little man in the back of the room, a rather timid looking man, sort of carefully raised his hand and said, "Dr. Popaderos," "Yes" "I have a question" "Yes, what is it?" He said, "I'd like to know, what is the meaning of life?"

As you can imagine, people were ready to go home, and they were very irritated by this little fellow's heavy question!

Dr. Popaderos very quickly quieted the group, he said to the class, "You know, if you don't mind I'd like to answer that question." He reached into his back pocket, and took out his wallet. He took out of the wallet a little mirror about the size of a fifty-cent piece, honed down on the edges, kind of sparkling. And then he told this tale, he said, "When I was a child, I began to realize that I could have so much fun with that mirror. I would simply catch the glint of the Sun, and shine that mirror into an otherwise darkened place. As I grew older I began to learn that this is no child's toy. This is really a metaphor for my life. Now I am not the light—I am not the source of the light. I am simply a broken mirror fragment. But if I allow the sun to shine on my mirror fragment, it is amazing what light I can bring into darkness." Then he said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, that is the meaning of life."

Each of us is a mirror fragment. We are not the Light. We are not the source of the Light. We are simply a broken mirror fragment. But when we permit the SON to hit our mirror fragment, and then bounce off into the life of a darkened heart, there can be change, there can be illumination.

Sunday, October 30, 2011 5PM

III. Our **Blessing** of ministry (vs. 15-16).

Since ministry is a miracle and a gift of God, we don't need to boast in the labors of others, as if they were ours. Our goal is not to have a self serving ministry that makes us look good, but to have a ministry that helps people to grow in Christ. That's exactly what Paul speaks of in **2 Cor. 10:15-16**.

2 Corinthians 10:15–16 (ESV) — “**We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, 16 so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence.**”

- A. Be **faithful**. Work to increase the faith of those **around** you. Paul wanted to be faithful with the Corinthians so that they would grow and reproduce.

Let me encourage you to be faithful where you are. False teachers don't want to invest in people. It's too costly. It's too much energy. They want to use people.

I want to encourage you to take the time to be faithful. A lack of faithfulness will diminish your fruit.

Tree Analogy

Several years ago I was so excited to purchase several beautiful bushes for 10 cents. I was proud of myself for finding such a bargain. I planted them in our back yard in the Spring, but by the fall I had a better idea. I chose to uproot them and plant them on the side of our house.

I watered them and cared for them but two out of the three bushes died. Uprooting comes at a cost.

It is so important that we bear fruit in the people that God has given to us in our sphere of ministry.

- B. Be **hopeful** – forward looking. The Lord will expand your influence to people **beyond** you. Verse 15, “**our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, 16 so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you**” (vs. 15-16). Paul says he wanted to have fruit among the Corinthians so that he could have a launching base to the regions beyond.

If we are faithful, we can be hopeful that God will expand our ministry beyond our own borders. I believe if the Lord tarries we will send missionaries out of this congregation.

Not only that, we need to have a vision for the nations here and now. We need to be faithful where we are, and God will give us further fruit and fruit beyond what we think is possible.

Spanish Ministry: God can Raise Up Any Ministry!

God has given us stewardship over our Spanish ministry, but what if God were to give us a Polish ministry, or a Romanian ministry, or a Ukranian ministry. If God can raise up one ministry, He can raise up ten!

C. Be **humble**. But be careful to boast in the God who makes fruit **abound** to you.

He says in **verse 16**, he wanted to “preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another’s area of influence.”

It’s easy to run into another’s ministry and claim it for our own as if God did something great by us. This is especially a temptation among teachers and preachers of God’s Word. It’s one thing to inherit a ministry, but then we ought to all bear our own fruit.

False Teachers were Dead Branches

The false teachers at Corinth were nothing but dead branches that had duct taped some of Paul’s real fruit to their branches. These false teachers were incapable of bearing true Gospel fruit.

God wants you to be fruitful, dependent and humble on Him. He will give you fruit if you are faithful. Then you can boast in what God has done.

We need to recognize what God has done through others, and not claim it as our own. God uses others, and we ought not to “boast of work already done in another’s area of influence” (vs. 16). Humility is vitally important. We ought to praise other ministries that are preaching the Gospel. We ought to support them and help them in every way that we can. It’s all God’s work. It is wrong to have a spirit of competition.

We ought to be amazed that God could work through any one of us. We ought never to take credit for what the Lord is doing through others. We should truly be amazed that He would work through any one of us.

When you consider what God is doing through you, there is nothing to be proud about. It’s amazing that He can use anybody.

Paul Boasted in the Power of the Gospel.

Romans 1:16 (ESV) — “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

Paul Preached Where Christ was Not Named

Paul lays out his burden in **Romans 15:17-21**, “In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. 18 For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, 19 by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; 20 and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, 21 but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.””

Are you preaching where Christ is not named? Don’t give up. **Galatians 6:9**, “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”

Your family may not be receptive to your words any longer, but keep praying, and when the right time comes, God will open a door.

IV. Our Boasting in ministry (vs. 17-18).

A. Make your boast in the **Lord**!
2 Corinthians 10:17-18 (ESV) — “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” 18 For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.”

Paul is quoting **Jeremiah 9:23–24** (ESV) — “Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, 24 but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me...For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.””

In a day that is filled with Christian celebrities and all kinds of activities, we need to remember that the only thing that matters in a church is the preeminence of Jesus Christ. We can try to boast in our music, in our children’s program, in the great teachers that come to our church, but let’s be done with that kind of boasting. “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (vs. 16).

B. Let us look for our **approval** from the Lord. “For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.” (vs. 18).

It’s so easy to look for approval with the latest fads and trends in churches. We ought not to seek to be novel and creative, but faithful!

Conclusion: We are now well into autumn. Probably all your neighbor’s leaves have already covered your front yard! Actually, I love to see all the various colors of the leaves together. Every single leaf is a different of red, yellow, orange, brown, yet if you

step back, it's as if one gigantic blanket of color has fallen like an autumn snow and covered the trees and the ground

God's church is beautiful in its diversity. Every one of us is different—with different functions and gifting and abilities, yet we are all one Body. And in that one Body, God gave each one of us differing spiritual gifts. Let us be sure to bear fruit right where we are with what God has given us. Paul told Timothy, in **2 Timothy 1:6**, “fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hand”. Ministry is a miracle. Let's submit to God that He might use us!