

The Sufficient Servant: Made Adequate by God's Grace

2 Corinthians 2:16–17

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Introduction & Review

Well we return again this morning to our study in the book of 2 Corinthians. And in our time together last time, as we came to 2 Corinthians chapter 2, verses 12 to 17, we addressed the issue of *battling discouragement in ministry*. Inasmuch as every one of us in the body of Christ has been called to ministry, if we are being faithful to our calling to serve the body of Christ and to serve the lost world we have been sent into we *will* come face to face with genuine discouragement in the ministry. People you've poured yourself into will return to the very sin you labored to help them out of. What you intend as "faithful wounds of a friend" (Prov 27:6) will be received as legalistic judgmentalism, and relationships will be strained. And perhaps worst of all, those whom we have counted among our closest brothers and sisters will fall away from the faith, demonstrating by their going out *from* us that they were never truly *of* us (cf. 1 John 2:19).

The heartaches of ministry are real. And no one, save the Lord Jesus, knew those heartaches more intimately than the Apostle Paul. He was no stranger to the dark realities of ministerial discouragement—chief among them, he says in 2 Corinthians 11:28, "the daily pressure . . . of concern for all the churches." He goes on to ask, "Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" Every true minister of the Gospel—whether pastor or layperson—knows something of that daily pressure of concern for the sanctification of their brothers and sisters. You know what it is to labor with those dear fellow-sheep that God has entrusted to you. You know what it is to have their greatest spiritual benefit bound up with your own affections, such that their joy is your joy and their sorrow is your sorrow. Paul was no exception to that.

We saw last time in verses 12 and 13 that the conflict in the church of Corinth brought Paul face to face with the depths of discouragement in ministry. Paul had sent Titus to the Corinthians with his "severe letter," in which he rebuked them for failing to properly deal with sin in the church, and for straying from his apostolic teaching and message. He had arranged to meet Titus in Troas, where he would report to Paul how the Corinthians received the letter, which would be a surefire indication of their spiritual state. Did they receive the benefit of his correction and repent of their sins? Or had his strong words only pushed them further away—further into the hands of these false teachers who would destroy their souls and corrupt the spread of the Gospel in that strategic city in Southern Greece?

And so the uncertainty that that brought caused him to write, “Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.” Paul—the man whose very meat and drink was to preach the Gospel where Christ had not been named—left a profitable ministry opportunity because he was entirely consumed with the spiritual state of the Corinthians. He says he had no rest for his *spirit*, and then in chapter 7 verse 5—after sailing to Macedonia to look for Titus there, he says, “For even when we came into Macedonia, our *flesh* had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.” Paul knew what it was to invest his entire being into the holiness of the people of God, only to have them betray him (and themselves!) by becoming infatuated with false teaching. He knew what it was to have his heart so dedicated to the spiritual well-being of his flock that their danger distressed him so much that he couldn’t concentrate on anything else.

But in the next verses, we see a window into Paul’s heart that shows us how this great servant of God battled the greatest of discouragements in ministry. And that is this: he turns his mind from focusing on the horizontal, and fixes his heart upon the true, spiritual, theological nature of the Christian ministry. He stops and reflects upon the cosmic significance of what he is a part of. He meditates upon the privileges of giving his life to the service of Christ and the Gospel. And it’s those truths fixed in his mind that begin to warm his heart, that give him hope, and that restore his joy in the Lord which is his strength for ministry.

And he expounds on the true nature of Christian ministry by employing **two illustrations**, which we talked about last time. The first was the illustration of military triumph. He says in verse 14: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.” And as Paul finds himself in the midst of discouragement, he reflects upon the ministry that he has been called to, and with the eye of his soul he sees Christ as a conquering general, gloriously triumphing over sin, death, and the enemies of righteousness, marching through the world in triumphal procession, in demonstration of His power and glory! And just as the lieutenants and other soldiers who served under the general rode on horseback alongside the general’s chariot in the triumphal procession, we who are faithful ministers of His Gospel are sharers in Christ’s victory through our union with Him—are marching along in that conquering train! And no matter how deep the pain or how intense the anxiety that comes with our ministry, it is no match for the joy that comes from knowing that in the very midst of affliction, the spiritual reality is that we are being led in triumph alongside our Sovereign King! And so Paul reflects on that reality, and it catapults him from restless despair to exultant thanksgiving!

But then he uses a **second illustration** of the true nature of Christian ministry that sustains his joy in the midst of discouragement. And that is the illustration of living sacrifice. He says in

verses 15 and 16: “For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.” He uses the language of Old Testament sacrifice to remind himself that we, as Gospel ministers, are like the sacrificial animal that is hoisted up on the altar, slaughtered to death, and burned as an act of worship to God. As we lay our lives down in sacrificial service to the people of God and to the lost who need the Savior, God smells the soothing, fragrant aroma of our worship to Him and is pleased.

And that is true no matter *what* the results are! As he travels from city to city, preaching the Gospel of forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in Jesus, he emits “the fragrance of Christ” through that Gospel preaching. And he says that the *very* same Gospel produces two polar opposite effects in people: to those who are being saved, it is a sweet, pleasant aroma of life that leads to life; but to those who are perishing, that very same message is the putrid stench of death itself! But what’s encouraging about that is precisely this: whether our Gospel preaching is welcomed as a sweet smell of life or rejected as the horrific odor of death, in both cases, the minister of the Gospel is still a fragrance of Christ to God!

And in seasons of discouragement in ministry, there is nothing more comforting than to grasp the fact that the results are not our responsibility! No matter the chaos that may exist in our ministries at any given time—whether we are welcomed and the Word is *received* or whether we are despised and slandered and mocked and persecuted and the Word is *disbelieved*—God is still absolutely sovereign! He *will* accomplish all of His good pleasure (Isa 46:10)! His Word *will* not return to Him without accomplishing exactly what He desires (Isa 55:10–11)—whether that be to save and sanctify, or to harden and condemn. And so that means, it is not our job to fix everything! It merely falls to us to be faithful to the message that we’ve received. As long as we’re preaching the true Gospel of Christ and ministering in the integrity of Scripture, dear friends we are a fragrance of Christ to God! Even if our message stinks to our hearers, as long as we’re faithful to preach the true Gospel, we smell good to God. *Faithfulness*—not results—is the measure of ministerial success.

And so Paul battles his discouragement in ministry by meditating on these realities about the nature of Christian ministry: that Christ our conquering general has secured the victory, and always leads us in triumph; and that no matter the storm we’re in, God is pleased with our faithfulness to His Word above all else.

But now, Paul comes to the middle of verse 16 and he asks a question. He has just spoken of amazing, weighty, sublime realities that are true about those who are ministers of the Gospel of Christ. Those who preach the Gospel are themselves—by virtue of their proclamation—the very fragrance of Christ Himself, wafting throughout the world. And as a result of Paul’s preaching and ministry, *eternal destinies* will be sealed as people encounter the aroma of Christ crucified

and risen (cf. Barnett, 155). The preaching of this Gospel will, for some, be the glorious means of salvation unto eternal life! And yet the preaching of this very same Gospel will, for others, be the terrible seal of damnation and eternal misery. Eternal life or eternal death must follow the preaching of the Gospel. And even though the results are entirely up to God, we nevertheless have a part to play as His instruments in the proclamation of the Gospel. Our ministry has eternal consequences!

And so as these stupendous realities stream into Paul's consciousness, he cries out in the middle of verse 16: "And who is adequate for these things?" Or as the ESV translates it: "Who is sufficient for these things?" Charles Hodge paraphrases, "If the work [of this ministry] is so great, if eternal life or eternal death must follow the preaching of the gospel, who then is sufficient for so responsible a calling?" (423). Philip Edgcumbe Hughes captures the idea when he asks, "How can any frail and fallible mortal fail to be conscious of his own utter inadequacy when charged with so stupendous of a responsibility?" (82).

Dear friends, fellow *ministers* of the Gospel of Christ: as you consider the weighty realities attached to the nature of the ministry to which we have been called, does Paul's cry resonate in your heart? In light of such terrible responsibility, are you confronted with the reality of your own *utter inadequacy*? When you perceive the true spiritual nature of what God has called you to do, do you recognize how utterly insufficient you are to do it? Oh, I hope so. Because that is the very thing that God has designed to happen! He has designed to completely overwhelm you with how totally unequal you are to this task of Gospel ministry, so that you would perceive your own insufficiency, be humbled to the dust, and cry out to Him for *His* sufficiency! For *His* grace!

"Lord, You want me to penetrate below the surface of superficial, polite, "Christian" conversation, and really dig into my brothers' and sisters' lives, and labor for their sanctification?! You want me to help people forsake their idols and pet sins, and help them pursue the glory of Christ as their greatest joy?! Lord, You want me to convince proud sinners—people just like me!—that some of their most cherished pastimes and habits are actually dishonoring to You?! Lord, You want me to go out into my neighborhood and actually preach that all people have so offended the Holy God of the universe that they deserve to perish eternally in hell, and that the only remedy is to trust in the righteousness of a Jewish peasant who was executed as a criminal 2,000 years ago?! Lord, who is adequate for these things?! Who can be sufficient for a ministry like that?!"

And the answer is: no one. No one but God Himself is sufficient to accomplish these things. God assigns His ministers such impossible tasks as we've just outlined, precisely so that He can magnify the sufficiency of His grace against the backdrop of our own helplessness. To use the language of 2 Corinthians 4:7, He transports the treasure of the Gospel in unimpressive, weak, earthen vessels. Why? "So that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not

from ourselves.” So that when something amazing happens—so that when sinners are regenerated and the fragrance of Christ is an aroma of life to them—there will be no doubt about who is responsible for such blessings! Not us! But God alone!

So, who is sufficient for these things? Paul says, “Sufficient in *myself*? Not me. ‘By the grace of *God* I am what I am,’ 1 Corinthians 15:10.” But Paul’s point in this passage is not to say that he’s not qualified for ministry. He makes no claim to *self*-sufficiency, but that doesn’t mean he believes he’s not able to do what God has called him to do. Paul actually answers this question in 2:16 quite directly in 2 Corinthians 3, verses 4 through 6. Look at what he says there: “Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. *Not* that we are adequate *in ourselves* to consider anything as coming from ourselves, *but our adequacy is from God*, who also *made us adequate* as [ministers] of a new covenant.” You see, Paul rightly perceives the enormity and impossibility of the ministry to which God has called him—so much so that he is painfully confronted with his own native insufficiency for the task. But his response to the discovery of his own personal insufficiency isn’t to abandon the responsibilities which have been committed to him as a minister. Rather, his response is to meet the challenges of ministry by drawing upon the infinite sufficiency of the grace of God. “*Not* that we are sufficient in ourselves, . . . but our sufficiency is from *God*, who *makes* us sufficient.” “Apart from Christ, I can do nothing,” (John 15:5), but “with God, all things are possible” (Matt 19:26).

And so Paul’s answer to the question, “Who is adequate for these things?” is first to point away from himself, in one sense, and point to *God* who provides the grace for all sufficiency. But in another sense, then, his answer to this question is, “I am adequate. I am sufficient. Not because of anything in myself, but because God has made me sufficient.” And that’s really where verse 17 comes in. It brings this concept of sufficiency in the ministry back into the context of the conflict between Paul and the false apostles at Corinth. Immediately after asking who is sufficient for these things, Paul contrasts himself in verse 17 with the false apostles. It’s as if he’s saying, “Dear Corinthians, if the ministry of the Gospel of Christ is of such a character—if true ministers of the Gospel deal with such supernatural realities as eternal life and eternal damnation—who can be adequate for these things? Certainly not those who treat the ministry as a merely natural endeavor, devoid of spiritual power, like these false apostles who would lead you astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ (cf. 11:3). No, dear children. They are not sufficient for such things. But I, having received my apostleship by the grace of God in truth, I am sufficient for these realities, because God’s supernatural empowering grace has *made* me sufficient.”

And so what you have in verse 17 is a profile of the faithful Gospel minister, made sufficient for his calling by the grace of God. He says this: “For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.”

In this single verse, Paul outlines **five marks** of the one who fits this profile—**five distinguishing characteristics** of the Christian who finds his sufficiency to minister the Gospel not in himself, but in God who makes us sufficient by His grace. And as we examine these **five marks**, I trust that they will be a fitting measure of the faithfulness of your own ministry. Is your life and ministry as a priest of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ marked by these **five characteristics**?

I. Preachers, Not Peddlers

Well the **first mark** of the faithful minister who is made sufficient by God is, **number one**: he is a **preacher, not a peddler**, of the Word of God. Paul writes, “For we are not like many, *peddling* the word of God.”

And this is just a fascinating word picture to describe illegitimate ministers of the Gospel. This verb that gets translated “peddling” is the Greek word *kapēleuō*. It’s used nowhere else in Scripture. In Greek culture, the noun form of this word, *kapēlos*, was used in a commercial context to describe the “middle man” who bought goods from a wholesaler and then sold them to the general public. And of course, because any businessman is in business to make a profit, the *kapēlos* would often jack up prices or would tamper with the merchandise in order to increase his revenue. In fact, the word *kapēlos* is used in the Greek translation of Isaiah, chapter 1 verse 22. As the prophet Isaiah is rebuking Israel for her dishonest and unjust practices, he says in Isaiah 1:22: “Your silver has become dross, Your drink diluted with water.” And it’s the word *kapēlos* that gets translated as “diluted” there. It communicates this idea of *watering down*. The dishonest *kapēlos* would add water to the wine that he purchased, diluting it and reducing its quality and genuineness, so that he could sell more of it for a greater profit. Pastor John summarizes it simply in his commentary when he writes, “A *kapēlos* was a huckster, a con artist or street hawker who cleverly deceived unwary buyers into purchasing a cheap imitation of the real thing” (74). And so the verb *kapēleuō* came to mean “to sell at an illegitimate profit,” or “to adulterate” (cf. Harris, 253), or “to peddle,” as the translators have rendered it here.

And so Paul is saying that the faithful minister of the Gospel who finds his sufficiency from the grace of God does not *peddle* the Word of God. He doesn’t *adulterate* the Word of God, by mixing divine truth with human ideas, man-made ideologies and strategies. He doesn’t *water down* or *dilute* the Word of God by softening its hard truths, by seeking to smooth out the rough edges of the offense of the cross.

And when he says, “For we are not like ‘the many,’ peddling the word of God,” he is pointing right at the false apostles in Corinth. He’s saying, “These false apostles, who are teaching you that true Christians don’t suffer for the Gospel’s sake like I do, but instead have a nice, easy life as children of the Sovereign King, they offer you a corrupt gospel! They are preaching, 2

Corinthians 11:4 says, *another* Jesus than the One you've believed in for salvation! The message of the cross is an invitation to die to ourselves—to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and to follow Christ to Golgotha, and lay our lives down in sacrificial service of the Gospel. But these peddlers water down that message of the cross. They preach a crown without the cross—a Jesus who makes much of you, who promises an easy life, free from suffering. And that Jesus looks so much more palatable to you than the crucified carpenter who invites you into the fellowship of His sufferings! And when you buy into that false Jesus, with that false Gospel, you're playing right into the hands of these hucksters, and you settle for a cheap imitation of the true, spiritual riches of the Gospel or Christ!"

And friends, if there is anything that our generation of Christianity has no shortage of, it is peddlers of the Word of God! Entire ministries are built around this very kind of hucksterism, that seeks to water down the more offensive and demanding aspects of the Gospel and the Christian life in order to make Christianity more palatable to fleshly people! This market-driven ministry mentality was the very backbone of the seeker-sensitive paradigm popularized by Bill Hybels and Rick Warren. Survey people to discover their "felt needs," and then twist the Word of God to tickle itching ears. This is the very same strategy that was employed the emerging church and those who call themselves "missional"—whose insatiable thirst for "relevance" with a culture who hates Christ and His Word causes them to insist that we need to become *like* the world in order to *win* the world. "Just the Gospel—just the unvarnished glory of Jesus presented from the truth of Scripture—well that's just not going to attract young people today!"

Do you see why this word picture of "peddling" is so apposite? A peddler is someone who knows that the product he's trying to move really isn't all that valuable in itself. He's embarrassed by his product's deficiencies, so he deceptively only displays the parts of it that appeal to the consumer. He esteems his product so lightly—he thinks so little of it—that he's willing to haggle back and forth about its worth. GraceLife, may God keep us from esteeming the glory of Christ so lightly that we're willing to haggle with unbelievers about His worth, by seeking to entice them to Christianity by something other than Jesus, as He's presented in the Word of God!

You say, "Mike, I go to Grace Church! I'm not a seeker-sensitive guy; I'm not an emergent-missional guy. I would never try to peddle Jesus!" I pray that's true, dear friends. I pray that's true. But it doesn't have to be money that you're seeking when you peddle God's Word. A currency that often seems to be much more valuable than money is the praise and applause of men. And the fear of man is so powerful, that even the best of us are tempted to blunt the sharp edges of the doctrines of Scripture because of how *foolish* the true Gospel makes us look to the world. "You mean to tell me that you don't believe that people are basically good?! Do you *hate* people so much as to say that God is *angry* with them, and will throw them into *eternal hell*, just because they don't *believe* the same things you do?! With all the other religions in the world,

how can you say that Jesus is the only way to heaven? You mean to tell me that in 2015 you believe that God can't forgive people without a bloody, vicarious human sacrifice?!"

This temptation comes in ten thousand different varieties! And as you sit at the holiday table with your family and relatives, you begin to think to yourself, "Well, maybe if I don't really *emphasize* sin all that much, she'll be a bit more open to hearing the Gospel." Or, "Maybe if I'm just not as strong on the demand for holy living that the Gospel makes on our lives, I can gain a hearing with them." And so you *dilute* the bitter morsels of the Word of God with human wisdom, and make them more palatable to the unbelievers you're trying to reach. Before you know it you're a peddler, haggling with worldlings about the value of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what happens when you start worrying about *results* more than *faithfulness*.

Paul says, "We," the true faithful ministers of the Gospel, "we're not like so many who *peddle* the Word of God." We don't adulterate it. We don't dilute it. We don't water it down. No, look at chapter 4 verses 1 and 2: "Therefore, since we have this ministry"—this *glorious* ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!—"we have *renounced* the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but *by the open statement of the truth*, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God!" Dear friend, dear fellow-minister of the Gospel of Christ: if you would seek to be a faithful servant of Christ who receives your sufficiency from God Himself, I plead with you to renounce all forms of peddling the Word of God. By the open statement of the truth, be **preachers** of the Word, **not peddlers**. As a faithful ambassador who heralds nothing other than the message he's received, you be *faithful* to preach the Gospel in its unvarnished purity, and you leave the results to God.

Transition: "We Speak"

And so the **first mark** of the faithful minister that Paul gives us in this text is that faithful ministers are preachers, not peddlers of the Word of God. Now, that first characteristic was negative; it was something that the faithful minister is *not*. But the rest of these characteristics of the faithful minister are all *positive* reasons that establish Paul's sufficiency as an ambassador of Christ (cf. Harris, 255).

And each of these next four features of all legitimate Gospel ministry are derived from four prepositional phrases that modify the verb *speak*. Let me read you a literal translation of verse 17 that follows the original word order of the Greek. Paul says: "But (a) as from sincerity, but (b) as from God, (c) before God, (d) in Christ, *we speak!*" Now, commentators have remarked that "Paul's entire life as an apostle is contained in these [four] prepositional phrases" (Hafemann, 114–15). And that's true, and so we're going to look at these four phrases. But if these four phrases summarize apostolic Christian ministry, we have to recognize (as we mentioned last

time) that the heart and soul of this ministry is the *verbal proclamation* of the Gospel! “*We speak!*”

Again, 2 Corinthians 4:13: Paul says, “But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, ‘I believed, therefore I spoke,’ we also believe, therefore we also *speak*.” Before going any further to see what this *speaking* ministry is characterized by, we have to stop and recognize that the Christian ministry *is a speaking* ministry. Yes, we are called to serve. Yes, we are called to live holy lives that adorn the Gospel. But all of our service and all our holy living will never open blind eyes to the glory of Jesus. Only the *Gospel* can do that. Romans 10:17: “Faith comes by *hearing*, and hearing by the *word* of Christ”—by the *message* concerning Christ. That is the Gospel. And so we must *speak* this Gospel. We must open our mouths and preach the life-giving truths about (a) the holiness of God, (b) the sinfulness of man, (c) the substitutionary life, death, and resurrection of the wrath-bearing Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. And (d) we must call all people everywhere to repent of their sins and trust in Christ alone for righteousness. We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we are being faithful in Christian ministry if we are not regularly speaking the Gospel. The Christian ministry is—first of all—a call to proclamation.

II. Sincerity

And Paul says the faithful minister’s proclamation is marked by **four more features**. In addition to not peddling the Word of God, a **second mark** of the faithful minister, made sufficient by God’s grace, is, **number two: sincerity**. Look again at verse 17. “For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity....” And I like the way the ESV renders this. They translate the phrase, simply, “...but as men of sincerity.”

And this concept of **sincerity** is a consistent and significant theme in Paul’s philosophy of ministry. We’ve already seen this word show up in chapter 1 verse 12, where Paul states that **sincerity** is a key factor in keeping a clear conscience before God. And you may remember from our study of that text that this Greek word, *eilikrineia*, is also a very picturesque word. It’s a compound word, made up of the word *helios*, which means “sun,” and *krinō*, which means “to judge.” Literally, to be **sincere** is to be “judged by the sun.”

You say, “How does that make sense? In what sense does the concept of sincerity intersect with the concept of being judged by the sun?” Well, one of the largest industries Paul’s day was the pottery industry. And, just like anything else, the various kinds of pottery differed in quality. The lowest quality pottery was thick, solid, and easy to make. But the finest pottery was thinner and therefore more fragile. Often, when thin pottery was being fired, it would crack in the oven. Now, rather than discard those vessels that were cracked, dishonest merchants—the kind of hucksters and peddlers that we just spoke about—would fill the cracks with a hard, pearly wax that would blend in with the color of the pottery when it was painted. In ordinary light, no one

could tell the difference. But when you held a piece of pottery up to the sunlight to test it, you would be able to see the imperfection, because the wax appeared darker than the rest of the vessel. Honest merchants would often stamp their products with the Latin term “sine cera,” which means “without wax.” And “sine cera,” is where we get our English word for “sincere.”

And so Paul says, “By God’s grace, dear Corinthians, the message I’ve preached to you and my conduct towards you is ‘sun-tested.’ Unlike the many, who peddle God’s Word to you for financial gain, you can hold up my life and message to the searching sunlight of Scripture, and you’ll find no cracks in my motives that I’ve tried to fill in with artificial wax. I’m not deceitfully scheming to appear one way before you while all the while being something different beneath the surface. I live my entire life in the searching, light the holiness of God. And my life and message are stamped *sine cera*, without wax.”

Dear friends—again, fellow ministers of the Gospel—can you say the same? Are you men and women of **sincerity**? Are you the same person on the outside that you are on the inside? Is your motivation in your ministry pure? Which is to say: are you motivated to continue on in ministry so that the glory of *Christ* might be displayed, and honored, and magnified, and be made famous? Or do you have designs to spread *your* glory? Do you want to *use* Christ, and Christ’s Word and Christ’s people, so that you can make a name for yourself? GraceLife, will you speak as from sincerity? Will you renounce all pretense and hypocrisy? Will you renounce all posturing to try to portray yourself as something you’re not? Will you hold yourself open to those you mean to serve, exposed to the light of God’s Word, that it might be plain to all that you are *sine cera*, without wax?

III. From God

The faithful minister speaks from sincerity. He also speaks, **number three: from God**. Look again at verse 17: “...but as from sincerity, but as *from God*...” And the ESV again does good job of bringing out the sense of this phrase by translating it, “...as commissioned by God.”

And it’s this connotation of “commissioning,” that brings to our remembrance that the minister of the Gospel is a **herald**, sent by God and thus under His authority, to proclaim precisely what God His master has commissioned him to speak. Listen to the following description of what the herald was in Greco-Roman society, from one of the foremost authorities on the Greek language:

Heralds “deliver their message as it is given to them. The essential point about the report which they give is that it does not originate with them. Behind it stands a higher power. The herald does not express his own views. He is the spokesman for his master. . . . Heralds adopt the mind of those who commission them, and act with the plenipotentiary authority of their masters. . . . It is unusual for a herald to act on his own initiative and without explicit instructions. . . . He is bound

by the precise instructions of the one who commissions him. . . . [In] general he is simply an executive instrument. Being only the mouth of his master, he must not falsify the message entrusted to him by additions of his own. He must deliver it exactly as given to him. . . . [He] must keep strictly to the words and orders of his master” (Friedrich, *TDNT*, 3:687–88).

“The essential point about the report which [heralds] give is that it *does not originate* with them. . . . Herald *adopt the mind* of those who commission them.” So Paul says: the faithful minister of the Gospel is a herald commissioned by God. He does not express his own views. He does not act on his own initiative. He does not add to his Master’s message any of his own ideas. He is not an orator, whose job it was to concoct whatever message would produce the desired results in the audience. He is a herald, who must deliver his Master’s message exactly as it has been given to him.

Everything about Paul’s life and ministry is driven by the message that he preaches. And he wants you to know that the message that he speaks is *from God*. God Himself is the origin of Paul’s proclamation. You see, the faithful minister is a *steward* of the truth, not a *manufacturer* of the truth (Storms, 79). Or, to change the figure again, the faithful minister does not assume the role of the *chef*, but the *waiter*. How terrible would it be if you went to a gourmet restaurant, and the waiter decided not to serve you the food that the world-class *chef* prepared, but instead brings you a culinary experiment of his own that he worked on at home and brought to work in his pocket! The faithful minister, made sufficient for his task by the grace of God, doesn’t bring to the people of God the fruit of his own opinions, ideas, theories, and interpretations, as if they were sufficient to meet the needs of Christ’s flock. No, the *faithful* minister, recognizes that God’s Word is alone the true food that will satisfy and nourish God’s people, and so he speaks *God’s Word*, and *God’s Word* alone.

My fellow-ministers, will you speak as a herald commissioned by God? Will you consciously derive the content and authority of the message you preach from God and not from yourself? You know, there are some Christians who are overly enamored with their ability to make clever quips that have some loose connection to Scripture. These are the people who seem to live their lives according to personal little philosophies expressed by one corny catch phrase after another: “Well, everything happens for a reason;” “God helps those who help themselves;” “Your life may be the only Bible some people read;” “Faith is the bridge between where I am and where God is taking me.” And Joel Osteen’s favorite catch phrase: “God is preparing you to be *victors*, not *victims*!”

Friends, I plead with you: have done with all this pseudo-Christian, pseudo-philosophical garbage, and *preach the Word of God*! The clever quips and catch phrases that you concoct from your own imagination might get cross-stitched on a pillow, but they won’t feed Christ’s sheep! The *people* of God live by the *Word* of God! And so the faithful *minister* of God heralds His

Word, as a man or woman under assignment! Dear friends, don't speak as if you were commissioned by yourselves; speak as **from God!**

IV. Accountable to God

Number four: The faithful minister of the Gospel is **accountable to God**. For the sake of readability, the NASB puts this phrase at the end of the sentence, but in the original it appears next. Paul says the faithful minister speaks from sincerity, as one commissioned by God, and here: "**before God**," or "in the sight of God."

And this, too, is another recurring theme in Paul's philosophy of ministry. In chapter 2 verse 10, he says he forgave the Corinthians "in the presence of Christ." In chapter 4 verse 2 he describes his ministry as "the open statement of the truth, commending ourselves to every man's conscience *in the sight of God*." And in chapter 12 verse 19, he tells the Corinthians, "All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves *to you*. Actually, it is in the sight of *God* that we have been speaking." In other words, more important than *your* judgment of me is *God's* judgment of me. He says that very thing in 1 Corinthians 4:3: "To me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court. ... the one who examines me is *the Lord*."

You see, Paul was constantly aware of the fact that the faithful minister lives his entire life before the open face of God—entirely in His presence and subject to His constant evaluation and assessment. He never lost consciousness of the truth of Proverbs 5:21, that "the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD, and He watches all his paths." Of the truth of Hebrews 4:13, that "there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do."

The peddler—the unfaithful minister—fills the small cracks of his fine pottery with artificial wax because he counts on the customer never holding the vessel up to the light of the sun. But the bright light shining from the holiness of God's face illumines each and every one of us to His sight. And the faithful minister *knows* that, and so he renounces all cunning and craftiness that depends on the deception of darkness, and lives before *men* the same way he would as if he lived before *God*—because he actually does live before God! All of his conduct is driven by the reality that he will give an account to God his Master who has commissioned him as a steward of the treasures of the Gospel.

And what does Paul say is the consequence of that? 2 Corinthians 5:9: "Therefore, we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, *to be pleasing to Him*. For we must all appear before judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Therefore, *knowing the fear of the Lord*, we

persuade men, but we are made *manifest to God*.” The faithful minister, friends, has an audience of One. And over against all of the *criticism* of men—and over against all the *praise* of men—the faithful minister reckons God and God alone to be his judge, and so his ministry is ruled *not* by the fear of man, but, as Paul says, knowing the fear of the *Lord*.

V. In the Name of Christ

So, dear friends, the faithful minister whose sufficiency is from God is not a peddler of the Word. Rather, he speaks from sincerity, as one commissioned by God, and as one accountable to God. A **fifth and final mark** of the faithful minister that we see in this text is, **number five**: he speaks ***in Christ***. Once more, translating verse 17 literally and according to the original word order: “. . .but as from sincerity, but as from God, before God, *in Christ* we speak.”

This is the identity of the faithful minister of the Gospel. We speak *in Christ*. That is to say, we find our identity for all that we are in Christ. It is from the fount of our union with Him by faith from which springs all that we are, all that we say, and all that we do. All of our assurance, all of our confidence, all of our hope—our entire identity—must be conditioned by our union with Christ. We are not first preachers. We are not first ministers. We are not first workers. We are—first of all!—*Christians*. We are men and women who are *in Christ*. And so we *speak* in Christ. He is the vine; we are the branches; and apart from Him we can do nothing. And so that vital, living union with Him is the very basis for all fruit that we might bear in our ministry.

Conclusion

And that brings me to a very practical word of application. The sufficient servant, made adequate for his ministry by the grace of God must not be a peddler who corrupts the Word of God by mixing it with our own ideas. We must be men and women of sincerity who deal openly and honestly with all those we come in contact with. We must be faithful heralds as commissioned by God, and we must always speak as those who are accountable to God. But above all else, friends, we must speak as those *in Christ*! We must speak as those who personally and savingly *know* the Jesus that we preach!

In his classic work, *The Reformed Pastor*, Puritan Richard Baxter lamented the terrible reality that there are pastors and ministers who preach the Gospel of Christ, who nevertheless themselves come short of believing in Christ. And his warning is every bit as applicable to us in 2015 as it was in 1656. He writes, “See that the work of saving grace be thoroughly wrought in your own souls. Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Savior, your own hearts should neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits. Take heed to yourselves,

lest you perish while you call upon others to take heed of perishing; and lest you famish yourselves while you prepare food for them. . . . Many a preacher is now in hell, who hath a hundred times called upon his hearers to use the utmost care and diligence to escape it. Can any reasonable man imagine that God should save men for offering salvation to others, while they refuse it themselves; and for telling others those truths which they themselves neglect and abuse? . . . Believe it, brethren, God never saved any man for being a preacher, nor because he was an able preacher; but because he was a justified, sanctified man, and consequently faithful in his Master's work."

{Refer to audio for the rest of the Gospel presentation and final exhortation}