

2 CORINTHIANS: MINISTERS OF A NEW COVENANT

INTRO - COMFORT AND AFFLICTION

2 Corinthians 1:1-2:13 - Stonebrook Sunday AM, 1/26/20, Matt Heerema

INTRO TO THE SERIES

This week we are beginning a new series in 2 Corinthians. We are not going to go through the entire book, but there is a section in the first half that is a coherent unit that we'd like to cover together as a church. It is on the topic of ministry.

Ministry is one of those nice churchy words that tends to fly past us without much thought, especially on Sunday morning. Some of you probably have me categorized in your mind as "the minister", and have a tendency to think of yourself as in a different category than me and my fellow pastors when it comes to these things. I know not all of you think that way, but my guess is many of you do.

One of the values we hold dear is a teaching of the Bible sometimes called "every member a minister." We spoke about this quite a bit this past fall, but the basic idea is that every single individual Christian in here has a part to play in the ministry of the church. Ministry isn't something reserved for the professionals. Jesus asks all of his people to engage in ministry.

So, what is ministry?

Well the word as used in the Bible simply means "service", to serve, minister means "servant". In fact, the word translated as "minister" is the word "deacon". So as ministers, and all of us are ministers, we serve. We serve a specific call from God a specific task from God.

And in 2 Corinthians 3:6 we see that we are to be ministers of a new covenant. And in chapter 5 we will see that this ministry is the ministry of reconciliation - that God has reconciled people to himself through Christ, and we are here as ambassadors to announce that good news.

So that's what we're here to do, as a church, we are to be ministers of this new covenant, of this announcement, this good news, this *gospel*. And each Christian in this room, and in every church everywhere, has a part to play in that ministry.

OUR GOALS FOR THIS SERIES

The pastors discussed some goals we're aiming at in this series. For the next 11 weeks, our goal will be:

- A. Help you understand the passage, and gain a little more insight in how to read a passage, but this is a goal for every sermon, I hope, so specific to this series:
- B. As we understand more accurately what new testament ministry looks like
 1. For those of you who feel like you don't have much to offer, personally, in ministry, to see that you do, indeed have a part to play, and I hope as we go, the Holy Spirit will help you understand a little more clearly what that role is...
 2. For those of you who are held captive to a fear of doing it wrong, or that you don't have the right tools or strategies or knowledge, to see that these things are entirely secondary, so you'll be free to engage in the simple ministry Jesus has for us.
 3. For those of you who don't have a church background where much is expected of you, – whose concept of participation in the church is showing up occasionally on Sunday morning “to get fed” – to see that New Testament ministry involves participation together with all the saints in the church, in the group activity of ministry. It's a lifestyle, not a weekly activity.

QUICK OVERVIEW OF 2 CORINTHIANS

- 1:1-11 - **The greeting** - we'll look at in more detail in a minute
- 1:12-7:16 - **Why he's sending Titus** instead of visiting them in person
- 2:14 - 7:4 - An explanation of **the new covenant ministry**
- 8-9 - **Generosity** toward the saints
- 10:1-12:13 - **Authenticity and uniqueness of Paul's ministry** as an apostle
- 12:14 - 13:10 - **Paul's plan for a visit:** “so get ready!”
- 13:11-14 - **Closing** and final exhortations

And it is this third piece that our series will be covering.

OVERVIEW OF 2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-7:4

- 2:14-3:6 - God's power makes us sufficient for ministry
- 3:7-18 - The gloriousness of this ministry makes us joyful and bold!
- 4:1-15 - God's methods, power, and timing determine ministry results, so we don't lose heart, even in the face of apparent “failure” in the world's eyes.
- 4:16-5:9 - Our reward is guaranteed in the next life, so we always have courage
- 5:10-21 - The twin realities of eternal judgement and Jesus's love controls us, so we boldly speak the truth, try to persuade others, and willingly give up our lives in doing so.
- 6:1-7:4 - We are God's children, so we are to live holy lives and do not partner with those who are not his children.

So that's where we're headed for the next 11 weeks up until Easter. We'll spend a few weeks on each of those sections.

COMFORT AND AFFLICTION

To get started, let's go back up to the beginning of the book and look at the greeting. Paul sets the tone of the letter here with an astounding perspective:

2 Corinthians 1:3-11 (ESV)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all **comfort**, who **comforts** us in all our **affliction**, so that we may be able to **comfort** those who are in any **affliction**, with the **comfort** with which we ourselves are **comforted** by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's **sufferings**, so through Christ we share abundantly in **comfort** too. If we are **afflicted**, it is for your **comfort** and salvation; and if we are **comforted**, it is for your **comfort**, which you experience when you patiently endure the same **sufferings** that we **suffer**. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our **sufferings**, you will also share in our **comfort**.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the **affliction** we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. **But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.** He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

"The afflictions we experienced in Asia" - Paul spent three years working with the church in Ephesus. The church was strong, and the gospel was going out strongly through the whole city. So much so that it had a massive impact on the economy which was largely influenced by pagan temple worship. This caused a riot, Paul's life was threatened, and he had to leave the city and this church he had spent three years laboring over.

I wonder if he felt that his work was not finished, that these new believers were too young to stand on their own, that they needed him and his team in order to be successful in ministry. Well, God wouldn't let him make that mistake. God arranged circumstances so that Paul had to leave, and "rely not on ourselves, but on God..."

And in this fact, that God was in control of all those circumstances, even the hardships, rejection, death threats, and persecution that he received, that God was in control brought Paul much comfort. And so he says “Blessed be the God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...” for doing that. Because he sees a greater thing at play: the opportunity now to encourage many churches with the truth about who God is and how he works.

Namely: that any effect our ministry has, is from the Lord, and not from us. That we are a necessary component, but not an indispensable one. God’s work in the hearts of his people determines the result of ministry, not our work.

So Paul can take comfort in God’s power in the middle of trials and tribulations he experiences in ministry, and here he is telling the Corinthian church to pay attention to his example, and find the same comfort: trust God’s power, not your own.

[Illustration / testimony Lawan Andimi]

- Pastor and regional community leader Rev. Lawan Andimi was kidnapped by Boko Haram terrorists on January 5. He was beheaded on Monday.
- His hostage video contained a plea for the government to secure his release through ransom, but then switched character mid way to be a testimony of faith, that I think echoes the Apostle Paul who said “We felt we received a death sentence, but that was to make us rely on God who raises the dead.”
- Indeed Rev. Andimi had a death sentence, but was relying on God, knowing that he would be raised from the dead.
 - “I believe that he who made them to act in such a way is still alive, and will make all arrangements, I have never been discouraged, because all conditions that one finds himself is in the hands of God—God who made them to take care of me and to leave [me with] my life.”
 - “By the grace of God, I will be together with my wife, my children, and my colleagues, [But] if the opportunity has not been granted, maybe it is the will of God. Be patient, don’t cry, don’t worry. But thank God for everything.”
- A week earlier 11 other Christians were murdered by these terrorists. And this just adds to the growing list of hundreds.
- Many are using this as political ammunition, calling out to the governments to do something, and that’s fine, that would be good if a military could put down these criminals, but it just strikes me how relatively powerless any government is to actually save anyone ultimately.
- Paul’s hope was not in a government. Reverend Andimi’s hope was not in a government. Their hope was in God who raises the dead. And Rev. Andimi, along with Paul, along with all the martyrs down through the centuries, rejoiced in their affliction, because they knew their God.

Paul's example echoes down through the history of the church.

Paul says that both the affliction he experienced, and the comfort he experienced were for the comfort of the Corinthian church, and by extension, I believe, all the other churches as well. As they were able to see Paul's example of patient endurance and faithfulness to the task of ministry in both hard times and good times, they themselves would end up being comforted as they experienced hardships in ministry.

I see an echo effect here. There is a reason we get to "hear" this correspondence. The Corinthian believers were able to take heart from Paul's example so that they could be comforted in their sufferings, which would in turn give courage to those believers who would follow after them, and so on and so on down the line to us here today.

HOW WE CAN COMFORT OTHERS WITH THE COMFORT WE'VE RECEIVED

1. Apply the Gospel to your life.

Remember that the Gospel is the announcement that Jesus has reconciled sinners to himself through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, which paid for the sins of all of God's people. That anyone who turns away from their life of unbelief and sin and trusts Christ's work to pay the debt they owe to God for their rebellion becomes a Child of God, a follower of Christ, a Christian.

In his first letter to the Corinthians he tells them to apply the gospel this way:

1 Cor 6:19 ESV

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own...

Remember that you do not belong to yourself, but to God, and glorify God with your life. That is, live in such a way that people understand more clearly who God is, by what you do (loving and serving people who don't deserve it, even those you'd otherwise consider your enemies) and proclaiming the message of reconciliation.

2. By glorifying God with your life, no matter what your circumstances are

1 Cor 6:20 ESV

"...for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

How do we glorify God?

I wonder if a lot of time we think about ministry in terms of what we can produce or accomplish. That somehow the number of people we can get to profess Christ correlates to God's happiness with us. That ministry is about preaching or leading prayer meetings or coordinating events or conducting a bake sale for a fundraiser or hosting a bible study or bringing cookies for stone cup or something along those lines.

Those are all good and necessary things. But if we tie our worth to them, if we think we are somehow more or less useful to God based on how much we can produce or accomplish, we're either going to get proud or discouraged.

Glorifying God is about helping people see more clearly who he is: beautiful, forgiving, marvelous, powerful, righteous, just, merciful, loving, in a word: glorious.

And we can help people see those things no matter what our circumstances are. We can tell the truth about God no matter what our circumstances are. We can proclaim the good news of the gospel, no matter our circumstances, and we can live life in a way that brings him glory, no matter our circumstances. And you do that by taking heart in your affliction...

3. And take heart

Where did Paul get this idea of comfort in affliction? Did he just make it up? Was it part of a special secret revelation from God? Actually he's just reminding us of what Jesus said to the apostles in the upper room at the last supper. Speaking of the promised Holy Spirit in this life, and the reward of an eternal life afterward, Jesus says to his disciples:

John 16:33 ESV

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation..." [Gk. affliction] "But take heart; I have overcome the world."

As you keep on believing, relying on, and applying the gospel to your soul in your affliction and suffering, you'll be able to proclaim and show the gospel to those who experience similar sort of suffering, and so bring them comfort that only the God of peace can bring.

Sickness, depression, unemployment, work stress, financial stress, marriage problems, the struggle of birthing, raising, training and educating children, the struggle of infertility, the struggle of singleness. Whatever your circumstance, as you hang on to the truth about who God is and what he has done for us, you can bring comfort to the afflicted.

As you apply the gospel, that you are no longer your own, but through Christ you belong to God, that your ultimate goal is to glorify him, and that you can do that through any hardship or any victory as you persevere and hang on to him, as you take heart and rejoice in God's mercy toward you, even in circumstances that would normally crush someone, you bring others courage. You show them a little bit more of what God is like, and what He does for his people.

Pray with me.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. As we go in to this series, how confident are you about your "ministry", your area of service, in the church? What do you see your role as? If you need help in discovering this, or perhaps even growing in confidence in your area, your community group is an excellent place to get input and feedback.
2. What are some afflictions you've experienced as you've worked with the church in "the ministry of reconciliation"?
3. What are some ways you hope to grow and contribute further in your partnership with the rest of the church in ministry?