2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 June 2024

Preacher: Paul Bolton

[0:00] I think I find few things more upsetting than being falsely accused.! Don't know if it's ever happened to you. Maybe something trivial. You're kind of running! running around at home with your brothers and sisters. Mum's favourite vase gets knocked! over. You were nowhere near it, but you get the blame. Or you're playing football. The player you tackle takes a dive and you're the one that ends up in the referee's book.

Those are quite trivial, aren't they? Sometimes it can be a bit more serious. Like those postmasters sent to prison in the Horizon scandal. Or closer to home, perhaps. We say something to a loved one, or maybe someone here at church. They kind of get the wrong end of the stick about what we've said.

They think we're saying something we hadn't said. And suddenly that relationship is strained or ruined. It's terrible, isn't it? That false accusation can feel like a dark cloud hanging over us. We're desperate to clear it up. Well, that's something of the situation that Paul is facing as he writes his second letter to the Corinthians. He'd planted their church four or five years earlier. He'd then spent 18 months with them preaching to them, pastoring them, then he'd left to continue his missionary travels elsewhere.

But since he'd left, serious problems had bubbled up in the church. Most recently, an anti-Paul faction, making all sorts of false accusations against him. And at one level, this letter is Paul's response to those accusations to show how they're totally unfounded and unfair. Actually, though, it's much more than that.

Paul's realised that what's at stake in Corinth isn't just his reputation as a faithful minister, but the spiritual health and very survival of this church. Because godly Christian leadership, faithful teachers who will bring God's word to us, who will model a godly life to us, are absolutely vital for the life of the church. Therefore, to move away from a faithful minister like Paul is to cut ourselves off from the source of spiritual life and health. To turn away to perhaps a more glamorous, more glamorous, outwardly impressive ministry would spell ruin for this young church.

[2:31] So in this letter, Paul spells out what healthy Christian leadership looks like, the kind of leadership that we should look for and support as a church, the kind of ministry we should exercise if we're called to lead. Indeed, the kind of church and people that we should be as we seek to minister God's word to a lost world. And it all flows out of the God that we meet in Jesus. Who God is shapes the way that we do Christian ministry and leadership. And that's Paul's argument in this passage.

We'll see first of all three marks of genuine Christian ministry, and then we'll see how those three marks are grounded in two truths that the gospel reveals about God. So first, those three marks of genuine Christian ministry. And again, there are spaces to fill these in on those sermon sheets. Number one, genuine Christian ministry is clear, not clever. It's clear, not clever. Again, that first paragraph, verse 12. For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God, and supremely so towards you. For we're not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand. And I hope you will fully understand, just as you did partially understand us, that on the day of our Lord Jesus, you will boast of us, as we will boast of you.

So that word boast comes three times in that paragraph. It comes 22 times in this letter of 2 Corinthians, 10 times in 1 Corinthians, but only 15 in all the rest of Paul's letters put together.

In other words, boasting seems to have been a particularly Corinthian problem. They were a proud church, proud of their intellectual superiority as well-educated Greeks, proud of their spiritual gifts and effectiveness, proud of their church leaders and their brilliant preaching. So with a twinkle in his eye, Paul says, you know, I've got something to boast about too, only not those things that you've

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-05-25 04:44:51

been boasting about Corinthians. No, what I can boast about is my transparency. That's what that word sincerity means in verse 12. It means being transparent. This bottle is transparent. You can see through it, and you can see that the water in it is clear, healthy water. Nothing nasty or unexpected in there, if I drink from it. And that's what Paul was like. Transparent, clear. So transparent motives, verse 12. No hidden agenda, no secret ambitions. He was a WYSIWYG sort of guy. What you see is what you get.
[5:35] And then transparent methods, verse 12. Not tricking people into the kingdom by using earthly wisdom, clever arguments, emotional manipulation, but trusting God's grace alone to open blind eyes and change hard hearts. And then above all, a clear and transparent message. Verse 13. We are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand. London, I guess a bit like Oxford, is a city that prides itself on cleverness. Clever finances. Clever media. Clever schools. Clever university. Clever government, perhaps. And the temptation is to think that to win a city like London, we have to use the kind of cleverness that London values. Compelling persuasion. Entertaining speakers. Glitzy presentations. We want a snazzy and successful church led by snazzy and successful leaders. So that when a colleague asks us where to go, go to church, go to church, we can be proud rather than faintly embarrassed.

Well, that kind of ministry and that kind of church might flatter our egos so that we can boast, but it won't build God's kingdom. It might be popular. It might get positive media coverage. It might be praised by the wider Christian world. But it won't save any souls. Only God's gospel can do that. So wise and faithful ministers, a wise and faithful church will give itself to setting forth that gospel as clearly and simply as possible.
That's not an excuse for being lazy or slapdash. Preaching the gospel clearly will require all the gifts and abilities and talents that God's given us. But as a preacher of an earlier generation put it, no one can give the impression at one and the same time that he himself is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save.
So what kind of church do you want to be? What kind of reputation do you want to have? A clever church known for the cleverness of your message, the giftedness of your ministers, the impressiveness of your building?
Or simply, that's the church where people talk about Jesus. Genuine Christian ministry is clear, not clever. Secondly, genuine Christian ministry is faithful, not flashy.
[8:16] It's faithful, not flashy. Verse 15. Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first so that you might have a second experience of grace.

I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say yes, yes and no, no at the same time?
A year or two ago, one of our children was having some orthodontic treatment and had to have five teeth removed in one go. Without naming any names, I felt very sorry for him.
So I promised to buy him a large tub of Haagen-Dazs ice cream on the way home. Which I did. Problem was, his mouth was very sore, so he didn't really feel like eating it at the time.
And then accidentally, a couple of days later, I ate it. Now, understandably, that unnamed family member was quite distressed. Felt let down by his dad, who'd promised something, but then failed to deliver.
[9:26] And that's the accusation that some in Corinth were making about Paul. Like I said, Paul had spent 18 months in Corinth, planting this church. Then later, when he heard about their problems, he wrote to them, promising them a couple more visits.

One on the way up to Macedonia in northern Greece, and then one on the way back down. But that first visit, on the way up, had gone so badly, been so difficult, that Paul had changed his plans. Decided not to visit. And now some of his opponents were using that as a stick to beat him with. Paul is fickle, they were saying. Flaky. He makes promises, and he breaks promises.
He's not a strong, reliable leader. He's a coward. A runaway. A flip-flopper. Now, we'll see in a moment why Paul changed his plans.
But for now, he simply says, verse 17, Look, I wasn't being flaky. Vacillating, changing my mind. I really had intended to visit you. It's just that circumstances made me change my mind.
[10:34] I'm not being weak as a leader. I'm simply trying to be wise. And again, I think he's tackling a mistaken view of Christian leadership that was doing the rounds in Corinth.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-05-25 04:44:51

That Christian leadership is all about being strong and decisive. Knowing what needs to be done, and sticking to your guns, come what may. But the big theme of this letter is actually the godly Christian leadership will often look weak and unimpressive.
Because the godly leader is more concerned about doing the right thing than giving the right impression. If Paul had kept to his plan, gone back to Corinth, given them a real telling off, then, yes, he would have come across as a strong, determined leader.
And some people would have liked that. But Paul knew it would have caused more harm than good. So he had the good sense and humility to change his mind. Genuine Christian ministry is faithful, not flashy.
And again, is that what we look for and value in our leaders? Not those who give the impression of being infallible, of never making a mistake, of always knowing the right thing to do and getting it done straight away.
[11:51] But those who are faithful, utterly committed to our welfare, willing to admit when they've made a mistake, wise enough to change tack if a plan isn't working.

Because they're concerned not about their own reputation, but only about the glory of God and the good of his church. Is that what we value? Is that what we pray for, for our leaders?
That kind of humility. Christian ministry is clear, not clever. It's faithful, not flashy. And thirdly, genuine Christian ministry. Hopefully still filling in the gaps as we go.
It's about loving people, not lording it over them. It's about loving people, not lording it over them. Now we'll come back to verses 18 to 22 in a moment, because they're really the heart of the passage.
For now, let's just pick up Paul's argument from verse 23. But I call God to witness against me. It was to spare you that I refrain from coming again to Corinth.
[12:51] Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy. For you stand firm in the faith. For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you.

For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice. For I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you, out of much affliction and anguish of heart, and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.
If you've read any Harry Potter, you might be familiar with the concept of a howler. A howler is a magical letter in a bright red envelope that literally shouts its contents at its recipients.
A howler is typically sent by an angry parent, Molly Weasley, to her disobedient and recalcitrant offspring, Fred and George. Well, Paul here is explaining to the Corinthians why he'd changed his plans, and instead of visiting them, sent them his own version of a howler.
[14:09] A stern letter calling them to repent. Now, that letter doesn't actually survive. It was written sometime between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, and it was clearly very strongly worded.

A passionate rebuke for the way they were conducting themselves as a church. Well, the reason that Paul didn't visit in person, the reason he sent that howler instead, wasn't because he didn't love the Corinthians, or didn't want to see them.
Quite the opposite. He'd done it, verse 23, to spare them. To spare them the pain of another difficult visit. He'd done it, verse 24, for their joy, and their faith.
So they'd have time to reflect on his rebuke, repent, and be restored. Above all, chapter 2, verse 4, he'd done it out of love. And again, Paul is contrasting himself with what the Corinthians valued in their leaders.
They wanted leaders they could be proud of. Leaders with natural charisma and spiritual authority. Able to impose their will on a church and get things done.
[15:17] And sadly, we're not that different. I remember an older, wiser Christian leader warning a group of us as young ministers, your church will want to put you on a pedestal and you will want to be there.

And sadly, church history, right up to and including today, is littered with examples of leaders who've succumbed to that kind of adulation. Overbearing leaders, celebrated for their apparent strength and success, but essentially bullying and exploiting the flock for their own egos and gain. But that kind of leadership is not Christian leadership because it's not Christ-like leadership. Christ-like leadership, the kind of leadership that Jesus showed when he walked this earth, is all

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-05-25 04:44:51

about sacrificing my ego, sacrificing my comfort, sacrificing my reputation for the good of others. Sometimes that will mean having to say tough things to people, like Paul does here. God-leadership does not shy away from difficult conversations, doesn't sweep problems under the carpet and hope they'll go away.
But equally, it doesn't relish and seek out problems and conflict. Sometimes it will decide with Paul that discretion is the better part of valour, and that a kind but clear letter or email is the way to give people time to reflect on what's being said, rather than a face-to-face confrontation.
[16:51] But it's overriding concern, the thing that determines whether and how an issue is addressed, will always be love. Not me getting something off my chest, me proving that I was right all along, but the eternal welfare of those that I serve.

Shall we look again at chapter 2, verse 4, and read it through. It's one of the most emotion-packed verses in the whole Bible.
Dare I say that a Christian leader who never experiences these kinds of feelings, affliction, anguish, tears, is not qualified to be a leader of God's people.
Because genuine Christian ministry is about loving people, not lording it over them. And when you love people, there is always the risk they will break your heart.
Clear, not clever. Faithful, not flashy. Loving, not lordly. But why? Why does genuine Christian ministry have to look and feel like this, so weak and unimpressive?
[18:10] We'll look again at verse 12, back at the start. True Christian ministry looks like this for the simple reason that any other kind of ministry will inevitably obscure the grace of God.

if a ministry or a church is outwardly impressive in some way, conservatoire-quality music, TED Talk-style sermons, barista-quality coffee, Hollywood lighting effects, then if that church grows, the credit will go to the church and its leaders.
Well done us. Let's write a book about it. But if a church grows despite not being particularly slick and professional, despite having very ordinary leaders, very ordinary music, very ordinary services and activities, if it grows simply by a clear message, a faithful ministry, and loving pastoral care, God's ordinary means of grace, then all the credit and glory goes to God and his gospel.
And that, I think, is what Paul is talking about in verses 18 to 22, and this wonderful exposition of God's faith. It's really worth a sermon, all of it on its own.
The point Paul is making is that the character of genuine Christian ministry is shaped by the character of the God revealed in the gospel. Christian ministry is clear, faithful, and loving because God is clear, faithful, and loving.
[19:41] So as we draw to a close, not another sermon, but let's briefly dig into these verses and what they tell us about God. So we're looking into the Christian faith. They'll take us right to the heart of why God can be trusted with our lives and eternities.

If we're Christian believers already, they'll give us two great reasons to keep trusting God for another week. And children, these are the last two bullet points at the bottom of your sheets if you've made it that far.
Number one, God is faithful to his promises. Here's the first thing that we learn about God. Faithful to his promises. Verse 18, As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus, Timothy, and I, was not yes and no, but in him it is always yes. For all the promises of God find their yes in him.
And that is why it is through him that we utter our amen to God for his glory. We call the two halves of our Bible, don't we, the Old Testament and the New Testament, we could just as well call them the promise and the fulfillment.
[20:48] The Old Testament, with all its laws and history and proverbs and poetry, is one long promise. A promise by God to sort out the mess that we've made of our world and our lives and to bring us back into relationship with him.

The New Testament is then the true story of how all those promises came true in Jesus. Now some of those promises are huge and global. Salvation for the world, blessing for the nations, the restoration of the universe.
Other promises are deeply personal and individual. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'll fear no evil because you're with me. Either way, the global, the personal, whatever the promise, verse 20 is true.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-05-25 04:44:51

Jesus is the one who brings all God's promises to pass, who fulfills every prophecy, who accomplishes every purpose, who matches every prefigurement. Perhaps there's a particular promise that you're struggling to hold on to at the moment right now.
The promise of forgiveness even for that sin. The promise of power to change even that habit. The promise of good worked out even in the most difficult of circumstances.
[22:09] The promise of God's purpose for our lives even when we feel totally hopeless and useless. If we're ever tempted to doubt a particular promise of God, we just look to Jesus and all that he has done to make that promise come true, love all by dying and rising to new life.

Greatest promise of all kept. God is faithful to his promises. And secondly, God is faithful to his people. Verse 21, and it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us and who has put his seal on us and given us his spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.
And here Paul shifts from talking about God's faithfulness in history to his faithfulness in our own lives and experience. From the work of Christ for us in keeping those promises and accomplishing our salvation to the work of the Holy Spirit in us in applying those promises and that salvation to us today.
And Paul uses two pictures to help us grasp the wonder of the Spirit's work in our lives. First he says the Spirit is like a seal of ownership. I've got a seal here, a piece of wax which you melt onto a letter and then a stamp that you put into it which leaves an indelible mark.
That's how I do all my correspondence to Reuben. Well that is, Paul says, God has done something similar for the Christians. He's poured his own Spirit into our heart.
[23:46] He's stamped us as belonging to him and he'll never let us go. He's sealed us as his own by putting his Spirit to live within us. We're marked out as his.

That's the first picture of God's faithfulness to us, a seal that can't be broken. But secondly, says Paul, the Spirit, still in verse 22, is like a guarantee or a deposit guaranteeing what's to come.
If you ever buy a house in England, I don't know how it works in other countries, but here you have to put down a deposit 10% of the purchase price. And that deposit is both a guarantee that you'll pay the rest because if you don't you'll lose the deposit and the house, but it's also part of the final payment, 10% of it.
Again, the Holy Spirit is like that. He's the first instalment of our salvation. When God brings us to faith in Jesus, he puts his Spirit to live in us so that even now, from the very first day we belong to him, we can know and love God and walk with God every moment of our lives because his Spirit is within us.
Even now, by the Spirit, I can call God Father and come to him in prayer. Even now, by the Spirit, we're being transformed, made glorious, as bit by bit he makes us like Jesus.
[25:09] And it's that old mastermind catchphrase, I've started so I'll finish. The same Spirit who brought us to faith in Jesus, who is at work in us now, making us like Jesus, will one day finish that work.

Just as he's given us new spiritual life, just as he is giving us new moral life now, changing us to be like Jesus, one day he'll give us new physical life, resurrection bodies, to live with Jesus forever in the new creation.
God is faithful to his promises, he'll always keep them. He's faithful to his people, he'll always keep us. And the point is, salvation is God's work from beginning to end, in its accomplishment 2,000 years ago by Jesus, in its application now by the Spirit.
And that fundamental truth should shape how we do and view all Christian ministry. It's God the Son who brings all God's promises to pass, not any Christian leader.
it's God, the Holy Spirit, who applies that salvation to his people, not any church minister. Now the job of the Christian minister, verse 20, the task of us as a church, is simply to say our amen to what God has already done, to proclaim Christ and his salvation, clearly and faithfully, and to invite others to discover and trust his faithfulness as we have.
[26:40] Worldly church leadership will rely on itself and so obscure the faithfulness of God. It'll be all about the leader, his gifts, his cleverness, his knowledge, his persuasiveness, or all about this particular church, its resources, its successes, its fame and reputation.

genuine Christian ministry will rely on God alone and his promises and therefore bring glory to God alone, to his grace, his promises, his son and his spirit.
Let me read verse 20 and then let's pray.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-05-25 04:44:51