

2 Corinthians 6:5

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Date: 04 January 2015

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] The world is yet to see what God can do with a man who is wholly committed to him.

The world is yet to see what God can do with a man who is wholly committed to him. And D.M. Woody resolved there and then, by the grace of God, I will be that man.

And he went on to be greatly used by God to bring revival in the US and the UK. But it's not true, is it? What those two ladies were saying to each other, it's not true.

The world is yet to see what God can do with a man who is wholly committed. He said, that is not true. Because I would want to argue with you that the Apostle Paul was such a man. If this letter was anything to go by, he certainly is, isn't it?

A life that is totally committed to the Lord Jesus Christ. What does it look like? And Paul showed us in this chapter in two ways. What a life totally committed to the Lord Jesus Christ looks like.

[1 : 16] First of all, by personal example. And secondly, by exhorting us. Example and exhortation. What does a life totally committed to Jesus look like?

So let's look at Paul's example. Verses 3 to 10. He invites you to check out his credentials. He says, verse 3, Now it's important to understand what is happening in Corinth.

You might not remember that. It's been a few weeks, isn't it? But the church in Corinth is drifting from its moorings. The congregation are drifting from the Apostle Paul, their founding father.

These interlopers have come in. False teachers have come in. Super apostles. And they've spent their time undermining Paul, discrediting him. So just go back to chapter 5, verse 12.

He says, We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you cause to boast about us. It seems like the Corinthians, because of the influence of these false teachers, they're a little embarrassed about Paul.

[2 : 31] Just like a lot of people in the church today are. They're a bit ashamed to be identified with Paul. And Paul says, no, we want to give you opportunity to take pride in us.

So that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen, rather than what is in the heart. So there's a great deal of emphasis in Corinth on the externals.

On superficial appearances. No, Paul says, we want to give you the opportunity to take pride in us. So that you can answer that kind of superficiality. So look at verse 12 and 13.

Look at verse 12. You are not restricted by us. But you are restricted in your own affections. In return, I speak as to children.

Widen your heart also. What that verse is saying is not particularly clear, is it? It's saying there's been a cooling off towards Paul. There's been distance between Paul the founding father and his converts.

[3 : 34] And he says, it's not from my side. So look at the end of verse 13 again. Verse 4. You are not restricted by us.

The problem isn't with Paul. Look at chapter 7 and verse 2. He says, again, does he? Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one.

We have corrupted no one. We have taken advantage of no one. We have not corrupted you. We have not exploited you. Make room for us in your hearts. It's pretty obvious. Paul is writing to a church that he has planted.

And he's appealing to them to make room in their hearts for him. He wants reconciliation. He wants warm relationships with the church in Corinth. Who have been alienated in their affections by these super apostles.

Now why does it matter? Why do you need to hear this? Why is it important? Well look at chapter 5 and verse 20. Remember what he says? He says, therefore we are ambassadors for Christ.

[4 : 36] God makes his appeal through us. If the UK tonight expelled China's ambassador. Or if the UK government expelled the American ambassador.

We would have a diplomatic incident, wouldn't we? It would be a scandal. To refuse to listen to an ambassador is a very serious thing indeed. Because an ambassador, as you know, doesn't speak for himself.

He represents the government. And the apostle Paul is saying to the Corinthians. We are Christ's ambassadors. To refuse to listen to us is to refuse to listen to Christ.

To distance yourself from us is to distance yourself from Christ. To shift and drift from Paul is to shift and drift from Christ. Do you see that? And once you see that.

You see that is exactly what's happening today, isn't it? People will say, Jesus, yes. The apostle Paul, no. Paul is the villain, isn't it?

[5 : 38] He is the nasty, sexist, bigoted Paul. People who say that have never read him at all. But Paul has got a very bad press. Paul is regarded as somebody who complicated the simple message of Jesus.

Paul has imposed his pharisaic version of the gospel on the simple message of Jesus. And yet Paul wrote 13 letters in the New Testament. If any man or woman, if any church or denomination is shifting or drifting from the apostle Paul, that isn't just a matter of personal preference.

That is apostasy. Drifting from Paul is drifting from God. And if you've got no place in your heart for the apostle Paul and his writings, then you've got no place for Jesus.

That's how serious it is. And that is why verse 1 of chapter 6 is so important. Working together with him then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

You may have received the gospel, but if you are no longer connected to Paul as your apostle, then it's still in vain. So let's check it out. It's a big claim to make, isn't it?

[6 : 47] It's very unpopular. People say, believe in Jesus, but don't follow Paul. Why should we follow Paul and his message? Because Paul's ministry is in line with the gospel that he preached.

Unlike the ministry of those super apostles, which was a denial of the gospel. Paul's ministry is in line with the message that has been entrusted to him as a messenger of Christ. So let's look at these verses.

What are the marks of an authentic gospel ministry? Well, in verse 4 and 5, the first mark of an authentic gospel ministry is hardship and suffering. Do you see that? But as servants of God, we commend ourselves in every way by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, neighbours, sleepless nights, hunger.

And the false prophets were saying, that is why he's such a loser. And Paul says, no, that is authentic gospel ministry. If you really appreciate the gospel for what it is, if you really understand the message of reconciliation, that it is the way for men and women and boys and girls to get right with the holy God, that human beings are under the wrath of God, and are heading for judgment day, and the only thing that can save them from the wrath of God is the cross of Jesus Christ. And if you recognise that tonight, well, won't you agonise in prayer for your friends and for your family? Won't you work hard?

[8 : 12] Won't we make sacrifices to get that message out there? And it's a message that people don't want to hear, isn't it? People don't like it, do they?

When someone is cross at you. You don't like it when someone is cross at you, do you? You don't like it. And the message that God is a holy God, and that you are a rebel sinner, and that God is angry with you, well, people don't want to hear that.

Do they? And so when you speak about reconciliation, that we are at war with God, and the only peace can be found through Jesus Christ on his cross, there will be beatings on cold shoulders, and persecution.

Such a message will be opposed. There will be riots and imprisonments. There was a book out a few years ago called The Heavenly Man. I won't ask you if you read it.

It was a remarkable book. There was some very, very disturbing stuff. There's a very funny story, which I want to tell you about when my brother met the heavenly man. I won't tell you. You can ask me about it after.

[9 : 18] But it is a book I wouldn't recommend, actually. And there's a lot in there that has come out that you have to take with a pinch of salt. And I think there's a lot in there which actually is not true.

I think when you check that out. And yet, there is a bit in there which is a great window into the underground church about what church is like in China. About how they're training missionaries in China.

Here's what he says. Each missionary receives training in several subjects. These include how to suffer and die for the Lord. We examine what the Bible says about suffering and look at how the Lord's people have laid down their lives for the advance of the gospel throughout history.

The second thing we teach them is how to witness for the Lord. How to witness for the Lord on trains or buses or even in the back of a police van on our way to the execution ground. And the third lesson we teach them is how to escape for the Lord.

We teach our missionaries special skills such as how to free themselves from handcuffs. How to jump from second story windows without injuring themselves. That's the world Paul lived in. And that is what it costs to bring this message of the gospel to a world that doesn't want to hear.

[10:28] And we've become soft, haven't we? And flabby. And now it's all about me. So you go to church and what you really get there is a bit of life coaching to get you over the Monday morning blues.

Listen to what Don Carson says. I look at my children and I wish for them enough opposition to make them strong. Enough insults to make them choose.

Enough hard decisions to make them see that following Jesus brings a cost. A cost eminently worth it. But still a cost. Isn't that brilliant? I look at my children and I wish for them enough opposition to make them strong.

Enough insults to make them choose. Enough hard decisions to make them see that following Jesus brings a cost. A cost eminently worth it but still a cost. Isn't that what Paul is talking about? We need gutsy Christians. We need Christians whose character is forged in adversity not in cotton wool. And you go to many churches and it is about me and it is about feeling good and it is about being positive about myself.

[11:36] Some people talk, don't they, about visualising what I want. That is a false gospel. The mark of an authentic gospel ministry is not ease and comfort, health and wealth and prosperity.

That is a false gospel. It is hardship, suffering and sleepless nights. At the beginning of the 20th century a bishop visited Cambridge University to make an appeal for missionaries to go to Sierra Leone to replace a dozen men and women who had been martyred.

During the course of his appeal, remember they're Cambridge students, he advised them that if they would answer the call to go to Sierra Leone that one of the things that they would have to bring with them was a coffin because they wouldn't be coming back.

By the end of the sermon he had a dozen volunteers. Just think about that. I talked to a minister this week and can't even get 12 people that pray to him. Doesn't suit.

I need to have my evenings free. You see, it's such hard work. It's such hard work being a gospel Christian. So much sacrifice is involved, doesn't it?

[12:45] But it is worth it. It is worth it. Doesn't the love of Christ constrain you? Doesn't it hem you in? Doesn't it make you want to change your schedule?

Doesn't it? So this great message gets out. The second authentic mark of gospel ministry verses 6 and 7 is the power of God and the Holy Spirit.

Now you're talking, you might say. Verse 6 or 7. By purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, by truthful speech on the power of God.

How can you tell when God is at work powerfully amongst the people? How can you tell? When we come together nobody speaks in tongues. Do they? No, they don't.

When we come together nobody falls over unless there's an accident. There is nothing that dramatic happens here Sunday by Sunday. If you're new, there's nothing dramatic that happens here Sunday by Sunday.

[13:46] It's very ordinary. The singing, some weeks is better than other weeks. We are pretty ordinary people and yet the word is preached. The sacraments are administered. We preach and we encourage each other to apply it to our lives but that is spiritual.

It's not the external dramatic thing it's what is happening in your heart. As the word is preached the proof of the Holy Spirit at work is what? You see it there, it is purity. There's not much purity around today, is there?

You watch the soaps. There's no purity there. And to live a pure life is impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit.

What is the sign that the Holy Spirit is working amongst us? Well it's purity, it's understanding, it is patience, it is kindness. And it seems so unspectacular doesn't it? Kindness, patience, understanding, sincere love, truthful speech, these are the signs that the Holy Spirit is at work. They are the signs of an authentic Christian ministry. What it looks like for a man or woman to be totally committed to the Lord Jesus. And that is a struggle isn't it? That is a battle.

[14:58] And I cannot be like verse 6 and 7 without the powerful work of the Holy Spirit at work in me. The third sign of gospel ministry verses 7 to 10 is contentment.

With the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left, through honour and dishonour, through slander and praise, we are treated as impostors and yet are true, as unknown and yet well known, as dying, and behold, we live as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, yet possessing everything. In every circumstance, Paul says, whether people approve of me or disapprove of me, whether they like me or whether they don't like me, they just go on speaking the truth. Plainly and clearly.

And that is what he means. The weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left. I think he's talking about in Ephesians 6, he speaks of the two offensive weapons.

You know, in the Christian army, the two offensive weapons and they are the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God, and prayer. And those are the weapons of our war. And so, we don't have any gimmicks, do we, as we face 2015.

[16:17] We don't have any shortcuts to make people become Christians. We cannot manipulate people into the kingdom. We can't argue people into the kingdom. All we have is the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God and prayer.

And the only way to understand what is happening, to Paul in his life, is to put your gospel glasses on. Look at, put 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21 on.

You see, when you understand what he has understood, that for our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God, well then it makes sense, doesn't it, to live like that.

So they, I got the wrong piece, you might have thought, wait a second, I just turned over the wrong piece in my notes. The weapons of our righteousness are the ministry of the word and prayer.

And whether people welcome us or drive us out of town, what we have to do as a church is preach and pray, preach and pray, preach and pray. the message of reconciliation.

[17:30] Paul is an ambassador, he doesn't pander the message to suit his audience, he doesn't seem to be really culturally relevant. So you go to the cinema, you see the illustration about gospel glasses, you go to the cinema and you watch a 3D film, it seems amazing to me, isn't it, that these Disney and Pixar and these people, they spend millions and millions of pounds on a film, and then you go to the cinema and to get the full effect, you've got to put these kind of plastic, these paper goggles, these paper glasses on, isn't it, little bits of, and you go watch a 3D film and it all comes alive to you, doesn't it?

Well, just look at this passage and look at how he describes himself. Just look down and see the passage, he talks about good report and bad report, genuine and regarded as impostors, known and unknown, dying and yet we live on, beaten and yet not killed, sorrowful and yet always rejoicing, poor and yet making many rich, having nothing and yet possessing everything.

You can only make sense of that if you've got your 3D glasses on. You know, when you haven't got your 3D glasses on, you watch the film and it just looks weird, doesn't it?

It's all a blur, you can't focus on anything. But as soon as you put those glasses on, that's when you understand what's going on. So let's look at the glasses, chapter 5, verse 21. You see, once you understand that verse, it all makes sense.

It just makes sense to live like Paul is living, with all this suffering, but unless you've got those gospel glasses on, regarded as an imposter, but he knows he's genuine, regarded as being unknown, and yet he knows he is known by God, so important, isn't it?

[19:18] Ministry is not about making a name for ourselves, but it is about our names being in the Lamb's book of life, dying, and yet because of the gospel, very much alive, sorrowful, but because you've got the gospel specs on, full of joy, poor, and yet making many rich.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The meek will inherit the earth. Those who submit, those who are not proud, those who submit to him as Lord and Saviour, the meek are going to inherit the earth.

We are very, very rich. You are an heir, and a joint heir with Christ, poor yet making many rich. Unknown, the world doesn't even know who we are. And yet as far as God is concerned, we are well known.

The world looks at the Christian and says, you've got nothing I want, nothing to offer me, and yet if you've got Christ, you've got everything. And these are the characteristics, how Paul is commending himself to his converts, who are being drawn away from him.

These are the authentic marks of Christianity. Endurance, hardship, purity, patience, kindness, contentment, in all situations.

[20 : 35] And going on, preaching and praying. Four things in verse 11 to 13. Vulnerability. Vulnerability.

Look at verse 11. We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, our heart is wide open. That's a scary thing to do, isn't it? That's a dangerous thing to do.

And we don't do it very often, because we're afraid of being hurt, aren't we? And so we protect ourselves. We put a shell that protects us. No, Paul says, we will put wide our hearts to you.

Look at verse 12. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return, I speak as to children, widen your hearts also.

He ran the risk of being rejected, and being hurt, and being abused, and being taken advantage of. But that is the sign that the Holy Spirit is at work. C.S. Lewis talks about this.

[21 : 34] He says, to love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be run and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one.

Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries and all entanglements. Lock it safe in a casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, it will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable. Unbreakable. Impenetrable. Irredeemable. The only place outside heaven where you can perfectly be safe from all the dangers of love is hell. Vulnerability. And that is the sign of an authentic gospel minister. Not that he's got all his act altogether. But that he's vulnerable.

And he makes himself vulnerable. Here are the marks of authentic gospel ministry. Paul is inviting us to look at him. To be totally committed to Christ.

[22 : 40] Let me quote C.S. Lewis again from Scoot It Letters. The senior devil suggests that the junior devil should attack a Christian convict on just this point of the supernaturalness of the church.

All your patient sees is the half-finished sham gothic thing on the new housing state. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face.

Bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understand, and one shabby little book containing Christian lyrics mostly bad and in very small print.

When he goes to his pew, he sees just that selection of his neighbours that he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. That's the senior devil talking to the junior one.

Make his mind flit to and fro between the expression like the body of Christ or the temple of the living God and the actual faces in the next pew.

[23 : 38] Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune or have boots that squeak or double chins or odd clothes, you will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.

Unless you've got your 3D gospel glasses on. It's totally different, isn't it? If anyone came in here tonight and looked at us, I don't know what they'd think.

But if they heard the gospel and if they looked at us through the lens of the gospel, it would look very differently, wouldn't it? We've got to put the 3D gospel glasses on when we come to church. So Paul is writing to a church that is drifting away from him. Check out my credentials. Make your assessment of my ministry. And then secondly he gives us this exhortation and his exhortation is change your allegiance.

Change your allegiance. Do you see what is happening is they are being swayed and influenced away from Paul by these false teachers, these super apostles. That is the point of the passage. So do you see what he says in verses 13 and 14?

[24 : 52] It's very, very unhelpful that there's a big paragraph break here. So in return I speak as to children, widen your hearts also. Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

And you need to put those verses together. Because they belong together. Let me try and illustrate it, alright? You know the home improvement programs that we watch?

There are loads of them, aren't they? And home improvement is a funny thing because at different stages of life, you need more space, don't you? So I read this week that when you have toddlers, you need a rumpus room.

And when they become teenagers, you need a parents' retreat. And when you're getting old a bit, you need a granny flat for your elderly relative. And you need somewhere to put these people, don't you?

A rumpus room, or a parents' retreat, or a granny flat. And you extend your home in order to put these people there. And Paul is saying, I want you to extend your heart.

[25 : 56] I want you to open wide your heart. I want you to have a heart extension, not a home extension, but I don't want you to put me in the granny flat. That is what he's saying.

It's not like you put Paul in the loft for something, somewhere out of the way because you're just a little bit embarrassed by him. He's a little bit too full on, listening to the apostle.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, we were converted under Paul, but you know we've moved on since then. I hear that all the time. I've been in ministers' meetings in Ealing, where I have said something about the propitiatory work of the cross, and I've been looked at patronisingly by ministers, and yes, yes, yes, I used to believe in that.

Or I was a word man. But I've moved on since then. And they put Paul in the rumpus room, or the granny flat, he's a bit embarrassing, let's keep him out of sight.

You know, if we've got visitors, you just shut that door. Because we don't want people, no, no, says Paul, extend your heart. Open wide your heart.

[27 : 05] Make room in your heart. Chapter 7, verse 2, make room in your heart. But in order to do that, what I want you to see tonight, in order to do that, you've got to eject some inhabitants.

Do you see that? That is the point. That is the shock of these verses. That is the point of these verses. That verse 14 is saying to you, you cannot have Paul and the super apostles living under the same roof.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. Don't team up with those that are going to lead you down the garden path. You're going to have to change your allegiance. Let me read this to you.

John Stott, in his biography, there was an occasion where he was at a great international conference with Desmond Tutu. Desmond Tutu, he was the Archbishop of Cape Town, but at this time he had just become the Dean of Johannesburg.

Desmond Tutu is a very, very charismatic figure. He's a liberal. From what he says, he's not really a Christian at all. Tutu spoke out at this conference against Paul's teaching on sexual behaviour.

[28 : 14] And this is what Desmond Tutu said. Paul was confused. Paul was confused. He was a creature of his own culture and sometimes didn't know what he was talking about. I don't agree with him.

John Stott, who was also on the platform, confesses that his blood reached boiling point. He simply blurted out, if I have to choose between the blessed Apostle Paul and the Dean of Johannesburg, I would have no difficulty in the side in which to follow.

I simultaneously cannot accept both Paul and Tutu because Paul is Christ's ambassador. And again, I think we are faced with this question this evening.

Will we follow the Apostle Paul or will we follow our culture? The answer is obvious, isn't it?

Because if you drift and shift from Paul, you've drifted from Christ, who is Paul, is Christ's ambassador.

And so you see these verses, I'm really sorry to disappoint you, because you may have been expecting me to talk about mixed marriages and business partners. And the Bible has got a lot to say about that.

[29 : 22] But when it says that you do not be unequally yoked, I don't think that it's talking about going out with a non-Christian or not. I don't think that is wise, I think it's wrong, I think it's dumb. If you are a Christian, to go out with a non-Christian, there are very good biblical pastoral reasons why that is a bad thing to do.

If you are in business and your business partner is not a Christian, it can lead to real problems. All that is true. But here, Paul is not talking about that. Paul is talking about gospel partnership. And he's talking it really, I think directly, to our post-modern mindset, which means that we can hold all sorts of contradictory ideas together and believe all sorts of alternatives, even though they cancel out each other.

And Paul says, no, you can't do that. And Paul says to you and I, make room in your heart for me. And don't team up with those who preach in the gospel.

And so stop listening to Benny Hinn. I hope that none of you do. If you're listening to him or Joyce Meyer or that guy, Joel Osteen, do not be yoked with false teachers. Don't be sympathetic with false teachers like Steve Mitchell or Rob Bell.

[30 : 41] But find a place in your heart for the apostle Paul and his writings. Don't be yoked with false teachers. Don't team up with someone who promises the earth but can never deliver.

Don't buy into the prosperity gospel. Don't get taken in by so much of the smoke and mirrors of evangelicalism in London. Embrace Paul.

It's very, very politically incorrect to do so, isn't it? And very, very unfashionable. But embrace Paul as your apostle, the apostle of the Gentiles.

Don't be tempted to accommodate to the spirit of the age. And soften the edges. And distance yourself from Paul. Because the stark truth of 2 Corinthians is to reject the apostle Paul.

It's to reject Jesus Christ. That's great.