

Passing the peace

*Sermon on 2 Corinthians 8:16-24 prepared by Jonathan Shradar*

**The church can be an honorable image of the Kingdom of God.**

We are still here! Even if virtually, we will keep proclaiming the goodness of Jesus and live to be transformed by his grace and the power of the Holy Spirit.

This week at small group - which was a really refreshing time - talking about this moment in history, and we ended the evening talking about not missing what God is doing in the midst of it. From accounts of his very real presence in other places to recounting how he has been faithful even among us, we don't want to be so distracted by the noise of the moment that we don't see and celebrate how God is at work to glorify himself and transform his people.

I have to tell you guys, I am really hopeful and expectant in this season. Mentioning the difficulty of pastoring in a pandemic, one leader said "It's like you are working really hard to solve unique problems all the time, only to simply survive and not move the church forward." What it may feel like. But the church is moving forward!

This is a refining and revealing time. Some of the old distractions are being pulled off and if we have eyes to see it, the church is being recalibrated to experience the power that has been the mainstay of the Christ-glorifying church throughout history.

Today, from a church ethics lesson we gain insight into the healthy functioning of the church and life in Christ.

**The church can be an honorable image of the Kingdom of God.**

**2 Corinthians 8:16-24**

What's up in the letter we are reading? Paul has invited the church in Corinth to continue and complete their commitment to send relief money to the church in

Jerusalem - which was experiencing persecution and poverty. We saw how the gospel makes us generous people - Christ's sacrifice for us moves us into new categories and we become eager to share.

Paul rightly now doesn't want to be like other more questionable traveling preachers - so while he encouraged the collection, he won't be the one to take it and deliver it. He tells us here that the church does things differently to present a Christ-glorifying example before the Lord and the world.

In this reading, we recognize elements necessary for us to thrive... in ministry, in the church, in life as believers. Partnership and resolve.

## **1) Partnership**

Paul has said get back to taking up the collection, be generous, and I am sending Titus and some partners to pick it up.

Don't go it alone. Paul always lived this way. He always had people with him. He calls Titus a partner and fellow worker. Much of the leadership of the early church can be traced to those ministering with or trained up by Paul. What a legacy.

Here it is others, in partnership with one another that carry out the work of the church. This is an essential piece to administering the grace of God - many hands! Not just the elite, not just who we would expect, but a partnership of believers formed, known, and sincere in faith.

There is Titus, the brother from the churches, and the earnest brother. And there are a few attributes of these guys that model something for us.

First, they are formed by God. Did you notice this about Titus? "But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you." (16) When the opportunity arises, Titus wants to be the one to go because he loves the Corinthians.

Something has been placed within him by God that frees him to care for the church. This is a great starting place for us in the church as well. Seeking the Lord, asking that he would put the same love in our hearts for his church. That he would form us into a partnership for his glory.

Next, they are known for the gospel. We see, coming with Titus is “the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel.” Dude was famous but Paul doesn’t write his name!

There is much speculation of who this guy is, was it Luke or someone else? Someone, endorsed by the Macedonian churches, and famous for the gospel he preached.

We might read this and think it was his skill that made him famous - which it may have - but more so it is that he goes on preaching the gospel. You know what you are going to get from this guy!

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the salvation of sinners is his tune. The message of grace to those who could never earn it. Freedom from sin, being made righteous in him. This is the motivation, this is what transforms, this is what is proclaimed.

I love Reservoir because we don’t have many people out to be famous. Hopefully, we prefer to be known by what gives us identity and life - the gospel.

Nickolaus Ludwig, Count Von Zinzendorf, was an Austrian born in nobility. But instead of going into government like his father, he dedicated his life to missions - the proclamation of the gospel. He partnered with others to build a community of prayer and sending (multiplication). He would say “there can be no Christianity without community.” He understood partnership, but he was also known for the gospel. The truth of Jesus that radicalized his life.

“Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten.” Was his motto. And though we remember him, he inspired and sent many more that followed those words.

Reservoir Church, if we are known for anything may it be the gospel we preach. Anonymous, in obscurity, carrying the only news that is truly good.

We may not know who this “famous guy” coming with Titus was, but he is fully known by Jesus and I bet that was more than enough for him. As it should be for us!

Formed by God, known for the gospel, and earnest. A second unnamed brother who has been tested and regularly is found to be earnest, sincere in his faith and life, a person of integrity, serious about Jesus, and serious about his church.

Likely not tainted by distractions or the noise of the world around him but Paul says made confident in the shared faith in Jesus. He knows the church will come through and it enlivens and emboldens him.

Led by the partner and fellow worker, for the benefit of the Corinthian church, this group is coming to further the ministry, to model for them and us what ministry and life can look like. And it is in that modeling we see something else essential for the church - their resolve.

## **2) Resolve**

Here we have the reason Paul is sending these three, why they are doing the collection in this way. **2 Corinthians 8:20–21** “We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, [21] for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man.” (ESV)

This says a lot about how money should be handled in ministry, but it says more about what the aim of our actions is - to be honorable before Jesus and before the watching world.

We are faced with opportunities for this all the time. Do we behave aligned with cultural standards or do we submit to a different depth of character? Where so many, even claiming the name of Jesus, cash in, abuse, act like fair rules don’t apply, the church of Jesus is called to something better.

To stand before Jesus honorable and to say the same of how we are perceived by others. It is all over Scripture, God's people respected, Elders to be of good reputation, the church living for others not fighting for advantage.

There are areas where honor before the Lord and man will clash - surrendering to King Jesus, is an affront to many. But we still resolve, like this trio and Paul to do what is honorable.

The church is resolved to submit to God in light of his way and let the world see. What the world will see is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. Citizens of heaven living undeterred; renewed in Jesus.

Get's us back to being ambassadors of Christ. The community of God's people - the church - is meant to be an agent of and evidence of the Kingdom of God.

And when we live leaning into this example, we become the very glory of Christ. The honor we show reflecting back on him.

“As for our brothers, they are messenger (apostles) of the churches, the glory of Christ.”

James Denney, “What an idealist Paul was! What an appreciation of Christian character he has when he described these nameless believers as reflections of the splendor of Christ! To common eyes they might be commonplace men; but when Paul looked at them he saw the dawning of that brightness in which the Lord appeared to him by the way.”

This is what we are meant to tap into. This is why the Spirit moves among us. This is why we labor in prayer. This is why we resolve to be honorable, to care for our neighbors as ourselves.

These things are not necessarily easy. Especially in a pandemic, in this political and cultural moment. But discomfort can be used to recalibrate us for more of this. It leads to self-evaluation and recentering on what is truly important.

The church has gotten fat with dishonor, far too many squabbles with each other, and living like it is us against the world... we have ended up overemphasizing loving of self resulting in disregard of our neighbor.

“We must face up to the enormous loss of credibility between the faith the church professes and the actions we demonstrate. Nothing else should matter to the church of Jesus as much as this...” Mark Labberton

The word keeps putting these things before us, to transform us, to stir us toward something better.

**The church can be an honorable image of the Kingdom of God...** I used “can” quite intentionally. We face the opportunity for it, the chance to partner with each other, to resolve together to live this way. Just as Paul put it before the Corinthians.

**2 Corinthians 8:24** “So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.” (ESV)

“With grace and hope, the church is to inherently and commonly seek and love the forgotten, the unseen, the undesirable, the uncool. We need to do so with [Honor and integrity] unexpected, tangible love, displaying counterintuitive compassion (including enemy love) and demonstrating a capacity for forgiveness, mercy and justice.” Labberton - Honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man.

The church can be an honorable image of the Kingdom of God.

If you are down for changing the “can” to “is”:

**Don’t go it alone** - Stick close to one another. This season is requiring more effort to make partnership happen but I think it is a good thing. It makes our community about more than just a Sunday event together. Link up, pursue. Better together.

**Live with Gospel Resolve** - To be made honorable by Christ's work for us, and to walk it out in ministry and life. For us, this will mean embracing the discomfort of the moment to engage with what God is up to among us. It is where we will see growth.

As many of you know, my preferred exercise is running. Which is quite a sight! A big dude galloping along. You should also know I am terribly slow. Some of you walk faster than I run. So this week I thought I should make an effort to get faster. Usually, I run with earbuds in playing a podcast, my phone strapped on me to map my movements. I wondered if these things were becoming distractions to improvement so I shed them.

And I ran harder and faster than I have in a long time. When I was focused on the task alone, even though it was uncomfortable, there were immediately noticeable gains.

There might be something for the church there... the Lord has allowed us to shed a lot of the distractions and I think he is gearing us up to run faster.

We do it, from the hope of the gospel, renewed by Jesus' mercy and grace when we soar and when we stumble. Becoming the glory of Christ.

Don't go it alone, live with gospel resolve, and...

**Let them see** - The world is watching. Your friends are watching. Your coworkers are watching. The nosy lady down the street is watching. Let them see where your hope resides. Let them see your effort to do what is honorable.

From a story about handling money (mundane), we have elements of transformation into the honorable image of the Kingdom of God. Let's be this church.