

The ministry of reconciliation requires open hearts.

Years ago I read a book that was as fun as it was disconcerting. Portland author Matt Mikalatos, takes readers on quite the adventure through the pages of *Imaginary Jesus*. It's fiction but sometimes fiction hits close to home! Matt, the narrator tells his story of his search for the real Jesus. The book opens with the Apostle Peter punching 'Jesus' in the face and chasing him out of a coffee shop. "Following Jesus is hard, especially when he is on the run."

Along the way, Matt encounters a number of faux Jesuses. Magic 8 Ball Jesus, Harley Jesus, even Liberal Social Services Jesus, Legalistic Jesus, Perpetually Angry Jesus... No bias or preference is left unvarnished. "Peter teaches Mikalatos that he must quiet falsehoods and mold a deeper relationship with the living, historical Jesus."

Then in the climax of the story - sorry I am ruining it for you - hundreds of imaginary Jesuses converge in an explosive and bizarre end. (Of course, I could be confusing it with the end of Zombie Christians...)

The book didn't win many awards and I don't think it made bestseller lists, but oh man it was a rich and fun challenge to the ways in which we mold Jesus to fit our perspectives rather than be formed by the real Jesus ourselves. It does the work of revealing what we make of our faith or ministry when we are immovable - stuck in our bias - which is exactly what has happened in Corinth and in the church today.

Paul once again builds the case for the better way, even when externally it doesn't look like it... and he invites us to the right posture for Christian growth, transformation, fruitfulness, and maturity.

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2 Corinthians 6:3-13

Context: “Super-apostles” had come into Corinth. Flashy ministry, noisy, and extravagant. And they had been sniping at Paul’s influence and ministry. Why after all would Corinthians Christians want to follow an apostle whose success was found in humility, whose boldness was acquainted with sacrifice, suffering, and affliction. Who would want to imitate someone as they imitate Jesus if it looked so rough and meant actually taking up a cross?

“Some at least, are now interested in the ‘other Jesus’ as proclaimed by these ‘super-apostles’ in a ‘different gospel’ (11:4). There is now the serious danger that the original response to the apostolic gospel may have been in vain. Thus Paul is recalling them to the true Jesus and the authentic gospel.” Barnett

‘Do not receive the grace of God in vain... It is one thing to know of the ministry of reconciliation and another to live it.

So here we have both a look into the pastoral and fathering (apostolic) ministry, and the marks of the Christian life, for those committed to the ministry of reconciliation.

As we go on our own journey this morning, we will see the need for the gift of endurance, the paradox of our transformation, and commit to the fellowship of open hearts.

1) Gift of Endurance

From the glory of the gospel: **2 Corinthians 5:21** “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (ESV)

This is the grace proclaimed at every opportunity. That humanity has a sin problem, a disregard and disrespect of God our Creator, and we can’t fix it on our own. We need intervention and God comes himself, Jesus lives the life of obedience we couldn’t, and he dies as our substitute granting forgiveness and righteousness. The perfection, the record needed to dwell with God for eternity. Every ounce of life then is lived from this truth for those that believe.

And Paul says that in the ministry of reconciliation “we put no obstacle in anyone’s way.” Paul aches for people to believe in and follow Jesus (the real one). He doesn’t make it hard for people to do, there are no prerequisites other than need!

But it does lead to a life of sacrifice and potential hardship, and he won’t have them caught by surprise.

As ambassadors for Jesus, as servants of God, we commend ourselves (we lay open our lives) for others to see, “by great endurance.”

28 descriptives... general troubles (afflictions, hardships, calamities);, troubles from others (beatings, imprisonments, riots); self-inflicted troubles (labors, sleepless nights hunger).

None of this is meant to be a surprise (the faux preachers say you should be rich and glamorous) but the New Testament says, you keep the joy of Jesus in jars of clay.

Jesus prepares his followers for it... **John 16:33** “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (ESV)

And it was key in the ministry of Paul... **Acts 14:22** “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” (ESV)

When it comes to suffering and sacrifice, I think this is among the things we “hear” but don’t hear. Taking up our cross is a nice sentiment until we actually have to lift it...

I get it, this honesty from Paul makes for a horrible recruitment tool - both to ministry and regular Christian life! But it is a vital reality for ministers and those taking up the ministry of reconciliation (all believers).

2 Corinthians is a “health and wealth” false gospel killer.

Endurance amidst adversities is the overarching quality of authentic ministry.

All ministry will endure some measure of suffering. Paul has an extreme case for sure - but he lives it empowered as having received a gift of great endurance... he says he gets through the ministry by that gift, The Holy Spirit, and the power of God. All things available to us as we live and follow Jesus.

The righteousness of God he has become is made manifest - reconciliation is a gift - so is the strength to do ministry.

We are not meant to do it all in our own strength. That's why so many drop out. Thinking of pastors but also believers who don't persevere...

“It is possible to endure in this life but to do it in a self-righteous, resentful, survivor-spirit that is self-pitying and angry at those who do not shoulder the burden with you while being inwardly proud of your grit. Instead of the fruit of the Spirit, there is bitterness and joylessness.” Hughes

And friends, I have no self-derived gumption to get through. I say with Paul that it is grace if I make it through...

“So if I stand and see it through
If I stay the course and make it home
If my heart is overwhelmed with peace in the storm
It's all, it's all because of Christ”

Should you be up for this ministry of reconciliation, then set aside your pride, step into the arena, and rely on the Spirit of God for all of life.

Paul's endurance declared that the gospel is true and that Jesus is worth it. And our endurance says the same thing.

And be prepared, progress won't always look like you expect.

2) Paradox of Transformation

The apostle gets through by embracing the fruit of the Spirit, clinging to right things - truth, humble, right-minded truth. Carries him through the paradox of life in the ministry of reconciliation, of following Jesus.

Think back to chapter 4 and the list we encountered there. **2 Corinthians 4:8–9** “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; [9] persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;” (ESV)

Seemingly self-contradictory statements... And we have more of that here.

2 Corinthians 6:8–10 “through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; [9] as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; [10] as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.” (ESV)

So the external experience will not always match the internal transformation at work as we follow Jesus and take on the mantle of ministry. The world’s expectations of success are often fleeting, but God is still at work.

In some settings, we experience honor in others less than that. The positives outweigh the distractions!

“The list is full of paradox, putting together things that clash like two musical notes crying out for resolution. These are the points at which the new creation of the gospel grinds against the old world like upper and lower millstones, with the apostle caught in the middle and feeling as if he’s being crushed to powder.” N.T. Wright

And as we have spent weeks talking about formation, we can’t miss this, it is happening whether we realize it or not when we are enduring by the strength of Jesus.

Paul is transformed from glory to glory, as he takes on ministry, and we too will experience the same thing. From our vantage point though, it's not always easy to see.

I once met weekly with a friend confounded by this very thing. He was sure he wasn't a believer because he still got angry with his kids, or things were hard at work... where was the proof of sanctification?! I constantly reminded him that if he wasn't being sanctified he wouldn't care if he was or not!

How often do we go through this life disinterested if there has been any change? I have been struck in my own life by this question during the pandemic. What a shame if we get through the pandemic and nothing in us has changed, become more reliant on Christ, been with Jesus! Nothing formed...

What Paul invites us to is joy in the midst of the transformation...

Philip Hughes "no sorrow, no disappointment, however severe, could ever interrupt, let alone extinguish, the joy of his salvation with its vision of unclouded glory to come, for this joy was founded upon the sovereign supremacy of God, who overrules all things and causes them to work together for good to those he has called."

The extraordinary balance of the passage reveals the mark of genuine Christian authenticity. Paradox and all.

That is the way of the ministry of reconciliation... Paradox. We are acquainted with it but don't despise it. This was Jesus' ministry as well. Producing Christlikeness; that it is actually producing fruit in us and in the kingdom as others believe in Jesus as we live with the unshakeable hope that can only be sourced in his grace for us.

"The call to follow Christ is a call to endure in sufferings, by the graces of the Spirit, through righteousness, riding the triumphant, exultant paradoxes of Christ, thereby demonstrating that our faith in Christ is real and that he is worth our full allegiance." Hughes

And we don't go it alone.

3) Fellowship of Open Hearts

We will be known by our love for one another... Until we're not.

Paul loves this church, and he longs for them to reciprocate the love which will result in following the real Jesus.

“We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also.” **2 Corinthians 6:11-13** NIV “restricted in their own affections...”

These verses most resonate with me and my experience of ministry, especially in this season.

"Right now, in this scattered and volatile season, it feels like I am pastoring opinions more than people." Alan Frow

Much energy is spent on what feels like pastoring biases... and the pandemic, the tensions over systemic racism, have all converged to be a revealing season in the life of the church.

What happened in Corinth - Paul and his band of pastors (Titus) open wide their hearts but the church is caught up in externals, their own preference above everything else, that makes them suspicious of the gospel. And that is really what is at stake.

Their hearts are closed to Paul and closed to what God would do among them.

“No one wants to have “restricted” affections, but that is exactly what we find when we grow suspicious of the gospel (v. 12). The result is that our present circumstances overwhelm us, our internal spiritual life becomes dull, our attention shifts to external performance, and we live by what apparently seems true rather than by what actually is true. When we embrace the upside-down

realities of the gospel by faith, all of this is set right. The gospel gives us wide-open hearts toward individuals who approach us with narrow, closed hearts (vv. 11–12). We should pray for heart-widening, upside-down, unrestricted gospel affections, as we “walk by faith, not by sight” (5:7).” Gospel Transformation Bible

This is where we build together as a church - with open hearts. Affection reciprocated, even when it is hard and the iron is sharpening iron... calling each other to something better than our current wallow or wrong thinking, or encouraging us further into the depths of the gospel as to let those waters shape the terrain of our lives.

One-sided relationships are awful ideas. The church though is called to affection for one another that sticks it out. That sacrifices, serves, honors, and matures together.

To be open to being formed by the Word of God, along with the people of God, which will mean the killing of preference and bias.

In a decade of ministry, I can tell you this is the hardest part for believers. We approach church like shoppers looking for the best fit. And when things get too tight or little itchy, we become restless. Rarely do people set aside preference and bias to lean into transformation. Rarely do we give up our imaginary Jesus to follow the real one.

It goes beyond relationships among us in the church, it goes to the gospel... Is my heart open to the real Jesus and his way? Are our affections dominated by or reserved for something else?

This is spoken as a Father... the way forward is to widen our hearts. To value each other enough to live that commitment as a higher priority than temporary things of self or politics, economics or education, or whatever it might be that attempts to take the “throne of your life” from Jesus.

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Receive the gift - Of righteousness from Jesus. Of endurance for the days ahead. Ask the Lord for strength, cling to his ways, and step forward. You are forever carried by Jesus and secure in him, there is no greater gift and we get to now live from it.

Widen your hearts - Repent. Turn from the patterns, other things that we cherish as most important, and come to Jesus, to his people and his mission. This is for all of us, if you don't see the ways you close your heart (or prone to) you are stuck - ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes then your heart as he gives you the endurance to make it through. And ask the people around... that's what we are together for!

Get on with the ministry of reconciliation - Don't despise the paradox, keep your eyes on Jesus. Learning, leaning in, loving (which means we might confront idols together, resolve to keep loving) - we make the appeal of God because time is short - believe in Jesus.

The real Jesus, the church he is forming, is not always what we expect but he and it is always good. For those committed to open hearts - this is our way forward.