

Truth for Today

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The Motive for Ministry - 2 Corinthians 4 and 5

One bright day in early spring a few years ago, my wife and I visited the Border Forest of Northumberland. After a picnic lunch, we stood on the banks of the Kielder Water reservoir and looked north towards to the Cheviot Hills. It was a spectacular view! Even more stunning was the perfect reflection of the hills and forest in the water! 2 Corinthians 3:18 states that true Christian ministry is fundamentally a reflection of the Lord himself: “[we] with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (New Revised Standard Version). For Paul, and therefore for every Christian believer, the real motive of a true Christian ministry is the desire to show out Christ! In the New Testament, the word ‘ministry’ simply means service, albeit the service of an apostle here in 2 Corinthians. Romans 12:1 urges believers to be servants of God. The Lord Jesus commanded His disciples to serve men so that their good works would be seen and their Father glorified (Matthew 5:16).

In 2 Corinthians 4 and 5, Paul explains the motive for his service for God in different ways. They are:

- God’s abundant mercy and ample sufficiency.
- The need for transparency.
- The surpassing greatness of God’s power.
- The Gospel treasure we possess.
- The God of resurrection.
- The present reality of eternal things.
- The guarantee of the future by the Spirit of God.
- The servant’s desire for heaven.
- The servant’s ambitions.
- The certainty of the Judgment Seat of Christ.
- The terror of the Lord.
- The love of Christ.
- The New Creation.
- The ministry of reconciliation.

We’ll look briefly at each of these in turn.

God’s abundant mercy and ample sufficiency (4:1-2 with 3:5-6)

In chapter 4, Paul draws to a conclusion what he said about his service in 3:4-18. This ministry is the New Testament (or covenant) ministry of grace, not law (3:6). It’s a sustained ministry of the Spirit, not of the letter which kills (3:5-6). It’s a ministry of life, not of death (3:7). And it’s a ministry of righteousness, not of condemnation (3:9). But, especially, it’s a glorious ministry of spiritual life and liberty (3:7-12 and 17). Paul concludes that it’s God’s mercy which enables him to execute this ministry (4:1) and that his ability came from God’s ample sufficiency (3:5-6). It’s God who makes us, as it made Paul and his co-workers: “competent... ministers of [the] new covenant” (3:6, JN Darby’s Translation). Verse 2 states that our responsibility is to remain true to God’s message by being open and honest, not adulterating it in any way. But this verse ends on a very sober point, that every activity is open before God, who will judge the motives of our hearts.

The need for transparency (4:2-3 and 6-7)

Primarily Paul thinks about Christian ministry as spreading “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God...For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:4-5, New King James Version). Christ is the image of God. The more we contemplate Him and thereby are transformed into His likeness (3:18), the more we’ll be able to clearly present the message of the grace of God found in Him. Returning, for a moment, to Kielder Water mirroring the trees and the hills, the reflection disappeared when the wind blew and disturbed the surface of the reservoir. Verses 3 and 4 tell us that the Devil is active against all Gospel service. As the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2), he blinds the minds of those

who do not believe to prevent the light of the Gospel shining into their hearts. However, we must make sure that nothing, either of us or from us, clouds the message that we are seeking to bring to mankind.

The surpassing greatness of God's power (4:4-6)

Paul isn't fazed by the opposing forces and actions of the god of this world. No, he understands the power of God in new creation. God is the same One who commanded the light to shine out of the darkness at the creation of the worlds. God's power is irresistible: "For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (Psalm 33:9, New King James Version). God now acts by that same power in new creation so that His all-varied glory in the face of Jesus Christ shines into our hearts for the shining forth of that same light through us by the Gospel (verse 6). In verse 6, Paul recalls his own conversion on the Damascus road, when God broke through into his dark and sinful heart by the light of the risen Christ.

The Gospel treasure we possess (4:7-12)

In Paul's day important documents were stored in earthenware vessels. We know that the Gospel is vitally important - it's the message of reconciliation (5:18-19). Verse 7 exclaims: "we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us". Paul uses the Old Testament story of Gideon's defeat of the Midians where clay jars carrying lights were broken to show how the Gospel shines out. He realised that the many and varied difficulties of Christian service in a hostile world only causes the light to shine out more brightly! So instead of being discouraged by such adversities, he seemed to want more of them. Not only did the truth of the Gospel shine out (verse 2), the life of the Lord Jesus also shone out (verses 10-11). It's necessary then that the servant of God should have this estimation of himself: a frail, maybe broken, human vessel, no more attractive than a clay pot, but carrying the most precious of treasures.

The God of resurrection (4:12-14)

In his ministry, Paul understood what we might call the inward spiritual exercise and experience of applying the cross to our natural lives: "always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (verse 10). He also understood that God has His own special ways of ensuring that outwardly the light is caused to shine more brightly in our lives: "For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is [actively] working in us, but life in you" (verses 11-12). But he didn't just know these as theoretical spiritual principles. He applied them by faith (verses 12-13). Like the Psalmist of Psalm 116:10, he was confident in the God of resurrection, and he appreciated the New Testament truths about resurrection. Because the Lord Jesus has died and is now risen, Paul knew: "that [God] who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise [all believers] up with Jesus" (verse 14). In other words, if the worst happened to him in the discharge of his service for the Lord and he actually died, he knew that he would have part in the first resurrection, the resurrection to life (John 5:29 and Revelation 20:6).

The present reality of eternal things (4:15- 5:4)

Knowing the truth of the resurrection to life was more to Paul than just an insurance policy. His motivation to continue was his understanding of the outcome of his service: "all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God" (verse 15). It spurred him on even though he was over-working his mortal body. He accepted that he was accelerating the course that nature takes with mortal man in his commitment to the service of God. Neither did this concern him, as he says in verse 16: "for if indeed our outward man is consumed, yet the inward man is [being] renewed day by day" (JN Darby Translation). (By extension, this should be the attitude and experience of all Christians as they grow old and face death). By faith Paul looked above and beyond the here-and-now. However kindly or harshly life treated him, or however much he sacrificed himself in his service, Paul looked off to the eternal things of heaven. Specifically, he contemplated God's glory revealed in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ at God's right hand (verse 18 with 3:18). By doing so, he was able to weigh his life on earth on the scales of eternal realities. The comparison of the temporal with the eternal led him to conclude that the totality of the distresses and difficulties he and his fellow-workers faced, with death always staring them in the face, were trivial, transient and transforming: "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (verses 17-18). Notice the conclusion he arrived at: all the immense difficulties he encountered in ministry became "momentary lightness of afflictions" when measured against the surpassing weight of eternal glory! What a motive this becomes for endurance in Christian ministry!

The guarantee of the future by the Spirit of God (5:5)

In 5:1-5 Paul outlines some further facts about the resurrection to life. He says that even if death does intervene in Christian service and destroys our bodies (or if in the natural course of events we die) every believer will be given a God-made body, which is ideally designed and suited for the eternal realms of heaven. In fact, verse 1 describes our earthly bodies as temporary shelters, or tents, whereas our heavenly bodies will be permanent structures. It's the indwelling Spirit of God who makes good the reality of these eternal things within our hearts. "He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee" (verse 5, New Revised Standard Version). The Spirit is the pledge or deposit of these future things.

The servant's desire for heaven (5:2-8)

Paul appreciates that God's overall objective is for morality to be swallowed up by [resurrection] life (verse 4). Paul's primary goal is to be with his Master, and in verse 8 he clearly states his desire: he'd rather be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. He said in Philippians 1:21-23: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the [body], this will mean fruit from my labour; yet ... I ... [have] a desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better". However, applying the principle "by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7, New King James Version) to the Christian walk, he says that we have total confidence in God (verses 6 and 8). Whatever our lot, whether it's life here, or life there in heaven even in the unclothed state of spirit and soul, we leave it to God's good ways with us. (The unclothed state is the intervening period after death but before the Rapture, when the resurrection of our bodies will take place (verse 3)). In a home or abroad play upon words, he contrasts 'at-home-in-the-body-on-earth but absent-from-the-Lord' with 'absent-from-the-body but at-home-with-the-Lord' (verses 6 and 8). The Lord's servants would rather have the latter situation - although verse 2 stresses that there's a groaning for the fully clothed state of life and immortality.

The servant's ambitions (5:6-9)

The appreciation of what God is doing, and is going to do, only makes Paul more zealous in his service: "Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him" (2 Corinthians 5:9, New King James Version). Christ meant so much to Paul that he was totally absorbed to please Him by faithful enduring service. In Philippians 3:9-14 he expresses his consuming constant ambition: "[to] be found in Him... [to] know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, [to be] conformed to His death... [to] press on, [to] lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus [had] also laid hold of [him]...[to] press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (New King James Version).

The Certainty of the Judgment Seat of Christ (5:9-11)

The servant's aim to please the Lord is based on the understanding of the certainty that service will be righteously and fully assessed by the Master: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (verse 10). This assessment will result in rewards for faithfulness. But it's also a review of all service purported to have been done in the name of the Lord. Therefore in his first letter to this Corinthian church Paul warned: "let each one take heed how he builds...For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the [judgment seat] will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:10-15, New King James Version). This scripture makes it very clear that the believer's eternal salvation isn't in question at the judgement seat. That was settled by Christ's death at Calvary. Only a believer's reward for service is assessed.

The terror of the Lord (5:11-13)

The thoroughly searching judgement of the Lord takes Paul onto another motive for service: "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:11, New King James Version). This is no trifling matter in Paul's eyes. It affected his whole attitude to service for God no matter whether others accepted him or not, and even if others thought him to be either too serious or mad (verses 11-13)! In other words, it restrained him from giving false impressions or harbouring wrong attitudes such as self-deceit.

The love of Christ (5:14-15)

The primary motive for any Christian service is the compelling love of Christ. The love of Christ is not a restraint; it's a constraint which powerfully liberates, leads, channels, and urges us on in service for God: "For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live

should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (verses 14-15). Nothing is greater, or more precious, to us than the deep, deep love of Jesus! "The Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20, New King James Version). The phrase "He died for everyone" is the compelling motive for Gospel service. Everyone must be told the Good News of His sacrificial love for them. But those who receive the message of the Gospel, realise the debt owed to Him. It leads us to the conclusion that, as saved people, we should no longer live for ourselves but for the One who died and rose again to bring us new life.

The New Creation (5:16-18)

Through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ God has started a brand new work, the work of new creation. God views us as "in Christ", a place of spiritual blessings and favour. As with all aspects of faith and practice, we must look at service from the viewpoint of new creation. First of all, we see Christ in His position of exaltation and glory. Next we see how God has worked in and with believers in Christ and exclaim: "if any one be in Christ, there is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold all things have become new; and all things are of God" (verses 17-18, JN Darby Translation). The new creation started when God raised Christ from among the dead (Colossians 1:18). It will be consummated in the new heavens and the new earth, when God who "said, "Behold, I make all things new" pronounces "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End" (Revelation 21:5-6, New King James Version).

The ministry of reconciliation (5:18-21)

Believers are brought back to God in a reconciliation that places no distance between them and God. They're brought into close relationship with Him. In fact, they're as near to Him as His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ! Paul rightly saw that the service God had given him for both saint and sinner was this ministry of reconciliation. Verses 18-21 explain the contents of that ministry:

- that God was personally present in Christ when He came into the world, verse 19.
- that Christ didn't come to hold against people their offences or to count up their sins. He came offering forgiveness and reconciliation to the whole world, verse 19.
- that this message, "the word of reconciliation", was committed to (put in) the messengers of the Gospel (verses 18-19).
- that these messengers are simply Christ's ambassadors, who act on His behalf. They appeal to people as He implored when He came: "Be reconciled to God" (verse 20, JN Darby Translation).
- that God provided the means of reconciliation through the death of His own Son at the cross: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us" (verse 21, New King James Version).
- that those who believe this message of reconciliation are made the righteousness of God in Christ. And they're established in relationship with God by Christ (verses 21 and 18).
- that all these things are from God, for His glory but for man's blessing (verse 13).

Challenge:

Are you reconciled to God through Christ? If you are, does it motivate you in your service for God, in the ministry of reconciliation?

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