

MOTIVATION FOR MINISTRY

SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

By Doug Goins

As we once again celebrate “Servant Sunday” here at PBC, I am encouraged to see the variety of diverse opportunities that God has given us to serve him and to express our spiritual gifts in ministry. This is a call to ministry from the Lord Jesus himself--a call to serve others.

Servants, by definition, take orders from their masters or from their employers. Servants work hard because that is what is expected of them. Servanthood calls for sacrifice and a commitment to follow-through. We are being asked to follow the Lord Jesus Christ in his work for the Kingdom of God; to follow him in his work here in this church, on this peninsula, and in the community at large. Responding to that call benefits us as individuals, as well as collectively. Ministering to the needs of others will be a joyful and challenging experience.

There is also a downside, however. If you say “yes” to a call to ministry, it may also prove to be demanding and sometimes difficult, even draining. Whenever you step up to a responsibility you face the possibility of failure, or risk being misunderstood by the very people you chose to serve within ministry. At times, you may experience inconvenience and weariness in the effort. You may even feel taken for granted by the people you want to serve and whom you serve with.

Choosing to serve in a ministry takes time and energy and resources. It means making choices, setting priorities and making sacrifices.

My wife, Candy, spent the last nine months working with the 2-year-olds. She describes it as a wonderful and joyful experience, but it was also demanding. She needed to arrive early and be prepared. Getting to know the parents was great, but there were times when she also disappointed them. That is a reality of serving.

If you are going to follow the Lord in ministry, what will sustain you over the long haul? What will motivate you to keep serving faithfully and consistently? The apostle Paul addresses this issue of motivation for ministry in 2 Corinthians 5:11-17. In this passage, Paul identifies two great motivating influences in ministry. The first is fear, and the second is love.

In verse 11 of chapter 5 Paul writes, “Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men....” Being realistic about who God is and the accountability he requires is what motivates Paul as he chooses to serve. “For the love of Christ controls us...” (5:14a) is also a compelling motive for ministry. Paul knows that Jesus loves him--showing it on the cross. In these verses (11-17) we see two major sections, a commentary if you will, that flows out of those two statements: the fear of the Lord, and the love of Christ is what motivates, defines, and influences Paul in ministry.

Being realistic about God

Verses 11-13 call for us to be realistic about God. A healthy fear, or reverence of the Lord, means we don't have to be afraid of people anymore--what they think of us as we serve.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you.

“Fear” of the Lord is not a bad thing. We are taught in all kinds of settings that fear is not a good way to motivate people, so we need to be clear about the kind of fear Paul is talking about. It is not fear driven by guilt, in terms of sinful rebellion against God. It is not driven by hatred, because we would just resent who God is. It is not the fear of mistrust, as if we are not really sure we can trust God to come through for us and be faithful to us. Those kinds of fearful responses to God were dealt with at the cross and displaced by the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ in our lives. Nor is it “terror of the Lord” as translated in the King James version, which is not helpful or accurate. Rather, it is a healthy respect for God. The Bible teaches us that God is good and loving and merciful. He is also a God of power, a God of might, a God of judgement, and One who will call us to account.

Electricity is powerful, but good. I have a tremendous respect for electricity. When I was a little boy in elementary school, I would spend summers on my granddad's farm in central Indiana. I loved to go out and help him, thinking I was doing something of value. One morning in particular I arrived in the barn shortly after he had washed down the concrete floor. While standing in water, I reached to turn on a power switch and was unexpectedly knocked across the room on my keester! Ever since then I have had a very healthy respect for electricity. I'm not terrified of it but have a healthy fear of it because I know the potential represented there. That is how we are called to live toward God.

King Solomon wrote, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10a). For Paul, that little phrase points back to the preceding verse and reminds him of his ultimate accountability before the Lord. We are accountable to the Lord in what we do in ministry. Verse 10 of chapter 5 sets the context for the phrase concerning the fear of the Lord: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” Paul's goal was to please the Lord in everything that he did. He understood that one day we will all stand before our Lord Jesus and there will be a time of evaluation; a time when our lives will be laid open before the Lord. So our calling, or whatever ministry we involve ourselves in, is to represent the living God and understand that we carry a tremendous sense of responsibility before him.

A ministry of persuasion

In verse 11, Paul summarizes his calling as a ministry of persuasion. The grammatical construction of that phrase, “we persuade men,” suggests that Paul is defining lifestyle. The Amplified Bible translates it “we seek to win people over.” The Message paraphrases it, “...we work urgently with everyone we meet to get them ready to face God.” Getting ready to face the Lord is a lifelong process.

Participating in ministry will provide each of us with an opportunity to interact with other people, whatever their age, wherever they are in life, wherever they are in the process of Christian growth. Even if they are in the process of coming

to faith or have just surrendered their life to Christ and are now growing up in him. Wherever we find people we are going to have the opportunity to interact with them on a spiritual level; a radical intervention in life to be expressed in relationships.

The truth of the gospel has implications in ministry, even exercising spiritual gifts that we think have nothing to do with communication like service, helps or mercy. Yet everyone of those gifts involves spiritually focused conversation with people. *We always want to point people to Jesus.* Whether the circumstances are physical or material or recreational or emotional or financial or relational, Jesus is always at the center of our interaction with others.

At PBC there is a ministry known as “Come to the Garden,” in which a team of people maintain the grounds and prepare beautiful floral arrangements that we all enjoy on Sunday mornings. The three women who provide leadership for this ministry are women who live and serve persuasive, Christ-like lives. It is evident in their conversations which are loving and caring and conscious of Jesus Christ. So no matter what the ministry opportunity, at the center is Jesus-- Jesus at work in peoples lives.

A respectful awe of God

That approach to ministry, as Paul describes it, is controlled by a respectful reverence for God, who knows us inside out, and who knows our motives. In verse 11 Paul says, “what we are is made manifest [known] to God” or “made plain to God.” Paul isn’t trembling with fright. He is respectfully aware that he is dealing with a God of truth and a God who will show us the truth about ourselves. That motivates Paul, and ought to motivate us, to honesty and faithfulness in the work that God has given him. We can trust God to deal with us fairly, honestly, and lovingly, and in response, we want to make all of our efforts in ministry count. We don’t want to pretend to be somebody we’re not, but to commit ourselves to being open, honest, and transparent with the people we interact with.

Ministry directed toward the conscience

This approach to ministry is also directed toward the conscience of men and women: “I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences.” From what we have observed thus far in our study of 1 and 2 Corinthians, if anyone should have known Paul’s heart for ministry and the integrity of his motives in serving the church, it should have been his brothers and sisters in Corinth. As we’ve seen in these letters, Paul was judged, he was misunderstood, and he was criticized. The problem really wasn’t his. Consider what Paul says in chapter 6, “Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange--I speak as to children--open wide to us also” (verses 11-13). Paul’s motives were wide open--consistently transparent and open-heartedly vulnerable to these people. The problem was theirs. It was their stunted, inhibited affections, as Paul describes it, that really led to the criticism of him.

A ministry heavily criticized

That Paul didn’t promote himself led to their misunderstanding of him: “We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, that you may have an answer for those who take pride in appearance,

and not in heart” (5:12). Paul’s attitude is in stark contrast to the Judaizers that we met earlier in this letter. They were the peddlers, the hucksters in ministry who only cared about externals. They put great emphasis on letters of recommendations, on seminary degrees, physical presence, polished oratory, flashy presentations, and in a word, they cared only about the activity of being successful. They were not concerned about the spiritual fruit of changed hearts.

Paul resolutely defines himself as a servant of God, or of Jesus Christ, and he only commends himself on the basis of God at work through him. He is just a vessel. Whatever is accomplished in terms of spiritual transformation or change, God did it. The only commendation Paul needed was the fact that there were new Christians in Corinth that had been drawn to faith in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Again, ministry is about serving other people, not about programs. It’s about people coming to faith in Jesus Christ and discovering who they are in Christ--people growing up into the fullness of life that God intends for them. Activities, schedules, and programs are simply a cover for the radically subversive work of the gospel in changing lives. In Colossians 1:28, Paul shares a wonderful vision statement for ministry that I think we could wrap around every ministry opportunity: “...we proclaim Him [Christ], admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, [and here’s the purpose:] *that we may present every man complete in Christ*” (emphasis mine). Involvement in ministry is about helping people grow up and become mature. However we are involved, it is a privilege to walk alongside others who are growing up into completion and fullness, so let’s not lose that perspective.

Appearances can be misinterpreted

Paul’s passion in life was to live persuasively for Christ, but motives and appearances can be misinterpreted. Paul says in 5:13, “For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you.” There were some accusations made against him. First, they said he was crazy. Paul’s response to that accusation is, “Well? God is the one who knows about that.” God is the one who makes the decision about how nutty we happen to be. In that little phrase “beside himself,” the Greek literally means that he lost his marbles or something to that affect. Paul is accused of madness and religious fanaticism because he is so sold out to the gospel and people growing in Jesus Christ. They said he went to extremes--he was unbalanced or manic. They said, “Look how he lives?” He pursued hardships and hazardous living beyond anything reasonable. Actually, Paul was in good company because the family of Jesus accused him of exactly the same thing. They were thinking, “Jesus is beside himself. He’s mad the way he pursues people and is sold out to ministry” (see Mark 3:21).

Paul was also accused of being “too normal” and they trivialized his passion for ministry. Paul’s response to that accusation was, “If I’m sober, it’s because of you. I care about you more than anything.” Paul’s ultimate concern is that his actions are faithful to the Lord’s calling in his life and that he consistently lives openly and honestly before everyone. He didn’t want to make the Corinthian believers ashamed of him. He wanted them to understand that he ministers fearlessly as the Lord’s representative and that he buys every opportunity to serve his Lord.

Philip Hughes writes in his commentary of this verse:

If this is madness and fanaticism, says Paul in effect, then I acknowledge myself to be mad and fanatical. But it’s a matter between God and I. What concerns you is the undeniable fact that I

was sober minded in bringing you the good news of Jesus Christ and in all my dealings with you.

(1)

Above all, Paul is not concerned with what people may think or say about him, but with the well-being and edification of the church of Jesus Christ. Paul had been delivered from being a “man-pleaser.” He cared more than anything about what God thought and not what people thought. He was realistic about God. Developing a healthy, respectful awe and fear of him is what will keep us faithful in ministry, and protect us from being overly sensitive about what people think of us and how they respond.

There will be times when you feel you are misunderstood in ministry. Years ago I received a call from a guard at the North County Jail in Palo Alto, which at that time was an overflow facility for long-term inmates. He asked if I would visit an inmate and connect with his family on the outside. I visited several times. I was then asked if I would be willing to bring a team from PBC in weekly to lead Bible studies. That began a ministry that lasted three or four years. God honored that ministry in terms of people coming to Christ and family’s lives being impacted.

During the first couple of years things went really well because the chaplain in the program in Santa Clara County was an evangelical. Then, the oversight of the facility went from the County Sheriff’s department to a corrections department with all new guards; and, eventually we also got a new chaplain to work with. He was not an evangelical, nor was he sympathetic to what we were doing in terms of teaching the scriptures.

Soon the new chaplain wanted to bring in a diversity of other groups and cut us back to one Sunday per month. We tried to play by the rules--going to all the chaplain meetings, getting the right papers, etc. Yet, toward the end of that time I was personally accused of being on a power trip, as if we were trying to impose our evangelical Bible thumping “stuff” on other people. It was painful to be misunderstood like that and to be misjudged. But what kept me going was an awareness that, ultimately, I was accountable to God. It’s true that I wanted to respect the authority of the chaplaincy and the authority of the prison guards that were there. But I had a higher authority who knew my heart, my motives, and knew why we were doing what we were doing. That was very comforting and stabilizing to me.

Controlled by the love of Christ

The second great motivating influence for ministry is found in verses 14-17: being controlled by the love of Jesus Christ. It is our love relationship with him that compels us to live, not for ourselves, but for other people.

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. (verses 14, 15)

That first phrase is the supreme motivating principle: Jesus’ love, which controls us or constrains us or motivates us or drives us out, and guides us after we’ve become involved in ministry. That sense of focused, purposeful living comes from the fact that Jesus loves us. An awareness of the unchanging love of God expressed through the sacrificial death of Jesus, is a much greater, much more powerful motivation than respectful fear for God. We are loved by God regardless of our activity or performance, and that knowledge should give us a sense of worth and value, of dignity, and a sense of security. In a word, it gives us *confidence* to serve in ministry whole-heartedly and not to worry about the results.

Paul says that Jesus' selfless death on the cross results in selfless life and selfless love from us. Christ died for others sacrificially, and we who are in Christ died with him. The death of Jesus Christ was for each one of us, and in a sense, he died the death that we should have died. He selflessly bore the penalty of our sins and died in our place. That is why his love has such a compelling power over us as Christians--love that calls us to respond in overwhelming gratitude. The hymn writer, George Matheson, wrote:

*Oh love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow may richer,
fuller be. (2)*

The death of Jesus, the death that we share with him, means that we have been raised in newness of life. It also means that we have been freed from bondage to ourselves--our own needs--and are now free to care about other people: "...and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (5:15). Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we who have spiritual life in him no longer live for ourselves, but we live for Jesus' sake. That is an important consideration when we respond to the call of ministry.

If our involvement in ministry is motivated by having our own needs met by those on the ministry team, or solely out of a sense to be needed, then we will end up unfulfilled, frustrated and disillusioned. We may feel rejected by the people we hoped would serve us and meet our needs. Jesus told his disciples that he came to serve, not to be served. Jesus is the one who meets our deepest needs, and then he expresses his life through us, but we've got to be willing to die. We have got to die to the right to have our perceived needs met by those around us. Then, and only then, can we focus on meeting the needs of other people. One of the great paradoxes of the Bible is that *life comes out of death*, yet everything in us naturally resists that. But when we are willing to die to ourselves it means life for others, and then amazingly, it will mean genuine spiritual fulfillment for us.

Centering our lives on others

There are two final and practical implications of this sacrificial life of love and centering our lives on other people. Consider verses 16 and 17:

Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

In Christ, we have the potential of seeing people in a whole new way—from *love's* point of view. This is important if we are going to think about giving ourselves away in ministry. It is far too easy for us to judge people by outward appearance--making preliminary judgements based on what people wear, their education and what schools they attended, where they live, the kind of care they drive, or perhaps their physical appearance.

Paul said he had judged Jesus that way and decided Jesus couldn't be the Messiah because he didn't fit the messianic mold. It was expected that the true Messiah would deliver Israel from the Roman oppressors and would restore the Davidic monarchy. The Messiah would set up God's eternal reign and put everything in order eternally on earth. But Jesus didn't do any of those things, and beyond that he died on a cross, which was the ultimate sign of God's disapproval. To all outward appearances, Jesus was a messianic pretender who justifiably died a criminal's death. But Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9) forced him to do some reevaluating. He realized he'd been wrong in his assessment of Jesus. Jesus died a criminals death, but the criminals were everyone except Jesus. Paul initially came to a false conclusion because the standards he used to form his judgements were wrong.

Ray Stedman writes in his book *Power Out of Weakness*:

“But,” [Paul] says, “no more. We’ve learned to look at people differently. We now see Christ for who he was, the Lord of Glory, the King of the Ages, the Prince of Life, God himself become a man....” [Paul] says, “We don’t regard him that way anymore, and we don’t regard other people that way either. We see them for who they are, men and women made in the image of God... They are important, significant people because God’s image is in them... We don’t pay attention to their wealth or their status or their fame or anything else. Everybody, even the most obscure, the lowliest, the weakest among us is a possible child of God, made in the image of God and therefore tremendously significant.” (3)

Someone who really understands Christianity is free from bias and prejudice and does not treat people according to their status.

The hopeful optimism of love

Living that way allows us to relate to people with the hopeful optimism of love. Look again at verse 17: “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold new things have come.” We are willing to stop evaluating people by the worldly fleshly standards of our old nature. *J.B. Phillips* paraphrases verse 17: “For if a man is in Christ he becomes a new person altogether....” We have got to see one another in that light. We have got to see one another as “people in process.”

There will be people in ministry that you are tempted to write off. You will judge them as being too stubborn or opinionated or too immature or too insecure or too overbearing or too self-righteous or too passive or too arrogant (which, ironically, covers all of us!). But when you find yourself looking at somebody like that and being fixated on a character flaw or issue, you've got to ask the Lord Jesus to help you see people the way he does.

PBC, as part of the body of Christ, is full of people in the process of spiritual growth and we are all at different stages in that process. We need to remind ourselves that God alone judges the human heart. We can relate to people in our ministries with loving optimism because we know that God is at work in their lives: If we are in Christ, and God has begun a good work in each one of us, he will follow through with us and finish what he started in us. God's creative process of sanctification isn't finished yet. Several years ago there was a button that said: “PLEASE BE PATIENT,

GOD IS NOT FINISHED WITH ME YET.” Every one of us needs one of those buttons. We are just more aware of the people *we* think need it more!

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases verses 16 and 17 this way.

Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it!

Over the past 20 years, many of you have made the choice to view me that way--with loving patience, with hopeful optimism. When I first arrived at PBC there were people who told me they thought the elders made a mistake in hiring me. There were people who said they didn't like me, and there probably were things about me that were not very likable--there still may be. But there have also been those who have been encouraging, and have said things to me like “We see God at work in you; we see you changing.” I'm grateful for people who made a choice to view me through eyes of loving, hopeful optimism. My hope for all of us as we consider serving others in ministry is that we learn to look at each other that way.

Let me close with a paragraph from Paul's opening “thanksgiving” to the church in Corinth. It combines both great motivation and influence for life and ministry, the fear of God, and the love of Christ—Paul's loving optimism in Christ:

I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:4-9)

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NOTES:

1. Phillip Edgecombe Hughes, *Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Copyright © 1962. William B Eerdmans Publishing co., Grand Rapids, MI. P. 192.
2. George Matheson, *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*.
3. Ray C. Stedman, *Expository Studies in 2 Corinthians - Power Out of Weakness*. Copyright © 1982. Word Book, in cooperation with Discovery Foundation. P. 107.

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