

Christ-Centred Priorities

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Ben. Good morning, everyone. It's lovely to see so many here in the church and to know there are lots more watching on the live stream or listening to the recording. You will find it helpful if you're trying to follow me. If you have a Bible in front of you, open to 2 Corinthians 10, or if you can get it on your phone. If you were here last Sunday, you may remember that during the service, I gave an update on our church's finances and encourage everyone to think about their giving to the Lord's work here.

Thank you. A number of people have responded positively to that. Really grateful. If you still want to give, there is information in the foyer. But I want you to imagine just now, if last week, having asked for your money, I stood up this morning and said, you think you're good Christians, but actually you're really unspiritual.

You're self-satisfied, you're proud of yourselves, and you're a bunch of troublemakers. And unless you change pretty quickly, I'm going to get tough with you.

Now, imagine if I said that, you might say, well, if he's looking for our money, he can forget it now. There's no need to insult us. Now, let's be clear, I'm not going to do that.

But it is very much what Paul does in 2 Corinthians. Last week, we were looking at chapter 9, before that chapter 8 with Graham, and Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to give to help the churches in Judea during a time of famine.

[1 : 3 3] And then in chapter 10, there's a really dramatic change of tone. And Paul starts by saying, well, you think I'm timid when I'm with you and both when I'm in writing.

Just wait till I come. If you haven't sorted yourselves out, you'll see how tough I can be. There really is a strong change in the letter.

And we might ask, well, why is that? Why does Paul go from being very ingratiating, if that's right words, to the Corinthians, to suddenly slamming them and saying he's going to come and to condemn those who oppose him?

One quite attractive theory of that is perhaps Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, having a good report from Titus about what is happening in the church at Corinth.

And perhaps when he was writing the first part of the letter, he received more word from Corinth that said, actually, Titus was maybe a bit premature. There are still huge problems in the church.

[2 : 3 3] And at that point, he thought, well, I'm going to need to change a bit and be a bit tougher with them. It's possible that's what was the case, but I don't think we need to assume it was something like that.

If we look a little bit differently at 2 Corinthians, I think there is a natural flow to it. So the first seven chapters are largely looking backwards. There have been big problems in the church.

We'll come back to them. Paul had written to the church and told them they needed to sort themselves out. Titus was able to come back and say, yes, they have largely repented of what they've done.

And Paul was really encouraged. And the first seven chapters, on the whole, are quite upbeat. And Paul talks about everything that we have in Lord Jesus. He talks about the future, a glory for the Christians that awaits us.

And it's a rejoicing by Paul that the Corinthians have repented, or most of them at least have. That was looking backwards. Chapter 8 and 9 were more looking at the present.

[3 : 3 7] So I was saying to the Corinthians, if you really have changed, and I believe you have, why don't you demonstrate that through your generosity to Christians elsewhere who are going through a time of great difficulty?

Now is your chance to do that. And Paul expresses confidence that indeed they will. And then in chapters 10 through 13, he is looking forward.

He's thinking, I'm going to be visiting Corinth again. And when I do, I want to make sure the church is in good shape. I don't want to be going there and having to judge them and to put things right.

And chapters 10 to 13 are Paul preparing the way in advance and saying to the Christians in Corinth, if you can sort things out, it will be a good visit that I'll come with.

If you're still following those who oppose me and are not preaching the right message, well, then I'm going to have to come and be tough and sort things out. So although the juxtaposition of chapters 9 and 10 might slightly jar us in 21st century Scotland, there is a logic to them.

[4 : 44] And I think in first century Greece, they wouldn't have come across in quite the same way. But we definitely are now in a different part of the letter. And for the next four chapters, Paul is going to be defending himself.

He's going to be defending himself against those who say he's not really a true apostle, that the people shouldn't follow him. And he's going to be saying to the church, they have to get rid of these people.

And he uses lots of different ways of doing that. There's quite a lot of irony in the chapters. You may notice he goes through a little bit of sarcasm. And Paul uses the word boast a lot.

You'll see this in today's passage. And we get again and again as we go through. Said with some embarrassment, Paul doesn't want to boast, but feels that he needs to just to highlight how much better he is than these people who are opposing him.

Let's just take a minute before we dig into the passage to remind ourselves of who it is that Paul's talking about. They're probably Jews encouraging the Corinthians to follow more of the Jewish religion rather than just rely on faith in Jesus alone for their salvation.

[5 : 59] They were people who came with oratory, who had a bit of presence to them, and who came to the church expecting to be supported financially by it and to be looked up to in it.

They would talk of mystical experiences they had of the Lord. They would try to show works of power, miracles, and they would present themselves as what Paul will call in a couple of chapters later, super apostles.

We are the real deal. We are the people who are really spiritual. You need to follow us. And they looked at Paul and said, he's a little man.

He's not very imposing. He's not the greatest of speakers. He even is a manual laborer. He makes tents for a living. Why should people listen to him? We are much more positive in our preaching, and we are the ones that you should follow.

Follow. But crucially for Paul, they weren't bringing the right gospel to the church. They weren't building the church up. They were just there for their own good, so that people would think a lot of them, and would give them lots of money.

[7 : 05] They didn't have any real interest in the Christians in Corinth. And so Paul in these chapters will defend himself against a number of accusations. I'll just give an idea of where we're going this morning.

There are a couple of particular criticisms that Paul deals with. The chapter divides itself quite neatly into two sections, from verse 1 to 11, and then from verse 12 to verse 18.

And in the first section, the people who oppose Paul are saying, he's bold when he writes. He's willing to have a go at us in writing. When he's actually with us, he's very timid.

He doesn't follow up what he says he will when he's writing. He is really not a person who has great confidence in himself, or who's someone that you should listen to.

Paul responds to that in these verses. And then verses 12 through to 18, the people are saying, well, he's not got any commendation with them. We come with our letters, saying how great we are, and all the wonderful things we've done.

[8 : 10] Where does Paul have that? And so Paul has to deal with that in the second part of the chapter. Now, below that, there are a number of sub-themes. Now, the questions here aren't quite too clear-cut, but let me just suggest the kind of things that the people might have been saying.

So they were saying, Paul's worldly. He's not spiritual. We are super-Christians. We are super-apostles. Paul's not like that. He just doesn't have the spiritual power that we do.

They also question Paul's authority. They're saying, Paul's constantly criticising you. He's putting you down. What kind of authority does he have to do that?

And then they're saying, he's encroaching on our patch. We are the people in Corinth now. What right has Paul got to come and to tell you what to do?

And it's that kind of criticism that we'll be thinking about. Paul, though, turns it around and he presents things much more positively. And I want to focus more this morning rather than the criticism on the priorities that Paul presents to us.

[9 : 21] So when they talk about him being hard or being soft, Paul says, I want to appeal to you with the gentleness of Christ. When they say that they're spiritual and he's worldly, Paul says, what I really want is to have the mind of Christ.

When they say he's only interested in criticising, that he's not really helping the church, Paul says, my concern is the body of Christ in building up, not in bringing down.

When they say he's got no commendation, he didn't come with all these letters, Paul says, what really matters to me is the commendation of Christ, that the Lord Jesus is happy with what I do.

And when the question is right to encroach on where they are, Paul says, I was sent to you with the gospel of Christ and that is what I'm going to bring to you.

So that's where we're going. We'll briefly talk about each of these and then at the end, we'll pull it together. So let's begin with the Corinthians saying about Paul that he's timid when he's with them, but he's bold when he writes to them and Paul countering that.

[10 : 36] So this little picture I put up on the screen is a brief summary of Paul's dealings with the Corinthians. So his first visit we read about in the book of Acts. He went to Corinth after he'd been to Athens and he had a fairly difficult time there, but he established a church.

He established a church that really flourished. It was supremely gifted. They had lots of spiritual gifts and they were able to grow and to develop. But they also developed lots of issues.

That was 1 Corinthians. Paul's first letter in our Bible is about lots of issues that Corinthians had because they just thought a little too much of themselves and they didn't deal with some of the sin and issues that they had in the church.

So 1 Corinthians is in our Bible. Paul then found that things were going or heard that things were getting worse in Corinth and he went back again.

What's sometimes called his painful visit. He went and essentially he was rejected by the church. These people who'd come in and were trying to present themselves as superior to Paul had wormed their way in and they had taken a lot of control within the church.

[11 : 47] And Paul then had a very difficult decision to make. He could have been very confrontational. He could have said no they're all wrong and I'm the true apostle and you've got to listen to me and got into a bit of a slanging match.

But he decided not to do that. Out of love and consideration for the church he didn't want to split it completely. He decided at that point not to bring judgment on them but to leave fairly quietly.

But what he did after that was he wrote them what's known as his severe letter. Now that's not in our Bible but it's referred to in 2 Corinthians. What he didn't feel able to say to them face to face he put in a letter and sent to them via Titus.

And that's why the Corinthians are saying or those who've come to Corinth are saying he's bold when he writes and he's timid when he's with us. It was Paul out of consideration for the church not wanting to split it by getting to a slanging match with them but to write them his considered views and warnings of what might happen if they didn't change.

So that last letter as I said was sent with Titus. The church responded well to it didn't become perfect by any means responded well and Titus came back with the good report and that's when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians.

[13 : 11] And as I said he looks forward in that to his third visit and hopes that that will be more positive. So if we go back to our thing about Paul's priorities what do we learn then in these opening verses about Paul's approach?

Paul almost says in these verses I'm going to do the opposite of what you said I'd do. You said I would be bold in writing and I would be timid when I come to you actually in my writing I'm going to be gentle I'm going to plead with you I'm not going to force you but if you don't change when I come to you things will be very different.

Paul wanted them to change he was desperate for them to change without him having to come and to force it on them. And he says in verse 1 by the humility and gentleness of Christ I appeal to you.

Very measured very calm but also very compelling. And he says in doing this I'm following the example of Jesus.

Now of course we know if we read the gospels that Jesus says Matthew chapter 11 take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. [14:37] And in some ways that is exactly what Paul is trying to do here being humble and gentle but enabling the Corinthians to learn from him.

But I think it's maybe a bit more in what Paul says than that. If we think back to the life of Jesus now Jesus could be very firm when he chose to be.

When it was the money changes in the temple or when it was exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees Jesus didn't hold back. But when he came to earth the first time he didn't come in judgment.

John 3:17 says God did not send his son to condemn the world but to save the world through him. He gave plenty of opportunities for people to repent and change their ways.

But when ultimately he was rejected by his own people when he was nailed to the cross he didn't bring down condemnation and judgment on them he says Father forgive them for they don't know what they do.

[15:40] His first coming was not to judge. And similarly Paul's saying when I came first and found all these problems I didn't come in judgment I came to give you a chance to change.

Over the last 2,000 years we've lived in a period of God's grace. And we have God's word that tells us about how our God is about his holiness and also about his love and that urges us to repent and to turn away from our sins.

And many millions over the years have done that and come to faith in Jesus. But there are warnings in the Bible about what happens if we don't do it just like Paul does in his letter here.

And when Jesus comes again for the second time we don't know when that will be could be very soon when Jesus comes again for the second time he won't be coming to save the world to take the sins of the world as he did when he died on the cross.

Rather he'll be coming so that people can be divided into two groups. Those who have trusted Jesus who have obeyed what he said who have their faith in him and not in themselves and those who have rejected Jesus.

[16:54] And those who have rejected him will be judged and will be eternally condemned. That's a really solemn thought. It's one perhaps we don't talk about often enough in church.

There's a judgment coming and we all need to make sure that our trust is in Jesus so that we can escape that judgment and have eternal life through him.

Maybe I could echo Paul's words. By the humility and gentleness of Christ I appeal to you to make sure that you are right with God through faith in Jesus so that when he returns you will be saved and not condemned.

Something there for everyone to think about. And if we are Christians if we are following Jesus to reflect on that and to think how we can help others to understand their need of the Lord Jesus.

That is the gentleness of Christ that Paul displays. The second thing we want to think about is the mind of Christ. We're looking at verses 3 to 6 here.

[17:57] And the accusation that's been made against Paul is at the end of verse 2 where he talks about people who think that we live by the standards of this world. I think what they're saying here is that they are strong Christians full of the Holy Spirit and they are able to say exactly what they think and to teach the people in exactly the way they want.

Paul lives by a different standard. He's not got the spiritual courage and the spiritual ability to deal with problems face to face.

He has to try and do it in writing. That's a very worldly way of looking at things, they say. Paul says not at all. What is key here is that we're in a battle.

The language of verses 3-5 is very much the language of warfare. Paul says I'm fighting a battle, I'm going to win that battle and in particular he says the battle is for the mind, to have the mind of Christ.

Verse 5 he says we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. That's a great theme as we go through the New Testament.

[19:14] that the battle in our lives is very largely a battle for our minds. Paul writes in Romans 12, do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind then

you will be able to test and approve what God's good will is.

His good pleasing and perfect will. Above anything else in our lives, if we are Christians, if we know Jesus as saviour, we need to seek to have the mind of Christ to be filled with thoughts of him and of his standards and to live by these and not the world's standards.

That's just what I've been doing. You may accuse me of being worldly. I've been trying with love and with gentleness to help you to get in the right path. But I have the mind of Christ and if you don't, then there will be consequences.

Paul says in Colossians chapter 3, set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. Can I challenge us this morning? What do we do to make sure that we have the mind of Christ?

I suggest the key things in that are reading our Bibles and meditating on God's Word and spending time in prayer, looking for God's will and his guidance in our lives.

[20 : 39] If we're Christians, if we're followers of Jesus, very important that we have the mind of Christ, that we look at the world from his perspective, not from the way the world looks at it, and we seek to be obedient to it.

Third point, then, is on the body of Christ. So the troublemakers in Corinth seem to be saying, Paul is just someone who criticizes constantly, but he's not got the authority to do it, and you should just ignore him.

In fact, they seem to be saying, he may not even be a Christian. If he's not got the spirit of Jesus in him the way that we do, is he really a Christian at all?

Apocryphals that one straight away, that he's saying they're judging by appearance, or maybe it could be better translated, you're missing the obvious. If anyone's confident that they belong to Christ, they should consider, again, that we belong to Christ just as much as they do.

The evidence of belonging to Christ is not having great confidence in your speaking, is not being able to do things that other people can't do, not even being able to do miracles or whatever.

[21 : 54] All of us who have our trust in Jesus, we have Christ, we are part of the body of Christ, the church. And Paul says, my aim is to build up this church.

Paul had established the church in Corinth, he loved it, he loved the people in it, and his greatest desire was that they should obey the Lord and that they should follow him closely as they grew in faith.

Bodybuilding can be painful, and I'm not a bodybuilder, but I know people who do it can be quite a painful and difficult process, but at the end of the day, they end up stronger, they end up physically in better shape.

I think Paul is saying here, actually, building the body of Christ at times can be painful too. It's not all about just encouraging each other and saying how wonderful we are and pointing to Jesus, vital though that is.

Sometimes in love we have to correct one another if we're going wrong, or we have to be willing to accept correction if other people have seen things in us and point it out.

[23 : 02] But the key thing is that together we build up the body of Christ, that together we seek to help one another to grow in our faith and in our love of the Lord Jesus and our devotion to him.

You and I are not apostles, far less super apostles, but all of us have spiritual gifts that God has given us, and all of us have a duty, a responsibility if we are Christians and we are part of the church to build one another up and to help us to grow in our faith.

And sometimes that can mean saying things people don't necessarily want to hear, but that God would direct us to help them to understand what they need to change in their lives.

We all have the opportunity to serve and to help others on our Christian walk. So that's the first half of the chapter if you like, the overall heading, the gentleness of Christ, but within that the mind of Christ and the body of Christ are priorities for Paul.

For the second part of the chapter I want to take the gospel of Christ first and we'll come back to the commendation of Christ later. Paul was commissioned by Jesus to go and to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

[24 : 19] There was later an agreement between the leaders of the early church that that is what they would do. Peter and others would concentrate on taking the gospel to the Jews. Paul would concentrate on taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

And as part of that, Paul had come to Corinth with the gospel message. The people who were critical of him had come in later. They'd kind of ridden on his coattails and got into the church and

led it astray.

But Paul was the one who had established, in human terms, established the church. So he says, quite legitimately, I can come and I can try to tell it where it's going wrong.

I have that authority, I've been given that authority by God, and I am going to ensure that the church get back on the right lines. Paul wasn't a fly-by-night preacher, come in today, preach the word, maybe get paid something and then go on and do something somewhere else.

Although he had a wide teaching ministry, although he went all over the known world at that time, when he established a church, Paul really wanted to care for it and to nurture it and to give it opportunities to grow and to serve.

[25 : 37] You may have noticed in the chapter that Paul talks about going to the regions beyond. Now regions beyond in that case would be places like Rome and Spain and other parts of the world which hadn't necessarily been reached with the gospel.

And Paul wants to partner with the Corinthian church in going and taking God's word to these places. They said, I won't do that until the problems are resolved in Corinth.

My first priority is to sort out the issues in the church that I established. Then with your support, I can go and take the word elsewhere. I think this illustrates for us two very important areas of gospel work.

On one hand, all Christians should have a restless desire to tell others the good news of the gospel. To reach for Christ, those who haven't yet been saved and are heading for judgment unless they repent and turn to Christ.

To die without Christ is to be lost forever and we want to give everyone we can the opportunity to experience God's salvation. But Paul reminds us the gospel is not just about making converts.

[26 : 51] It's not enough, it's essential, but it's not enough that people just become Christians and then drift on with their old life and nothing changes. Rather, the gospel is about making disciples, about people coming to faith in the Lord Jesus and then growing in him and becoming more like Jesus in their daily lives.

And that's what we're about as a church. We want people to come and to trust in the Lord Jesus. But we also want to see spiritual growth, people developing and flourishing in their faith as they draw closer to the Lord Jesus and as they serve him.

I think there's a slightly sobering warning here as well that maybe we need to think about. I'm not thinking about anything particular when I say this, but there is a danger in churches that if there are problems, if there are people causing difficulties or divisions or troubles, that takes up an awful lot of the time of church leadership and it restricts the ability to spread the gospel and to grow the work of Christ.

We all need to be sure if we are a member of a church that we are people who are there for the building up of others and not for causing trouble or to reduce the time that the leaders of the church have to reach out and to plan ahead with the gospel.

The final one and then we'll put things together. The commendation of Christ. What was happening here was that these people had come to Corinth with letters saying how wonderful they were.

[28 : 26] Paul says actually they wrote the letters themselves. I don't think each individual probably wrote their own letter, but probably a group of people and they wrote glowing reports of each other. They had very little value because it was only their assessment and they were only comparing people with a small group.

Might have looked convincing, might have looked as if these were good people and people you should listen to. In practice the letters that they brought were worth almost nothing.

Back in chapter three where Paul faced a similar challenge about his letter of commendation, he said that actually his letter was written on the heart. His letter was the church in Corinth.

You only had to look at what had happened in the church, at the change that had been in people's lives, and you could see that the work that Paul had done among them was genuine, that his gospel really could bring changes.

He doesn't repeat that here, but he makes a vital point. Right at the end of the chapter, verse 18, he says, it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

[29 : 41] Ultimately, when we get praise from others, we enjoy it, let's face it. If someone comes and says, you did a really good job on something, that's good, and it gives us a boost, and it's

something that we should do for one another, encourage each other as we serve the Lord Jesus.

But ultimately, the kind of commendation that we get from humans has limited value. It will give us a boost, it will maybe help us, hopefully doesn't make us too proud, but it's not what we should be doing things for.

Paul says what really matters is the commendation of Christ. What really matters is serving faithfully so that when we face the Lord Jesus and give account for our lives, he's able to say to us, well done, good and faithful servant.

And that is worth so much more than any praise or commendation we may get from others. Let's not look just at the things that we think will be popular with others that will make them think highly of us.

In our service for the Lord Jesus, let us do it for him, and much of it may be unseen, but he, our Father, our Heavenly Father, sees what is done in secret, and he will reward us.

[31 : 01] If we do things deliberately for the praise of humans and we get that, Jesus tells us we'll have had our reward in full at that point. So let's serve with the right motives, and let's have all the right priorities that Paul talks about.

Now just very quickly, let me bring things together. This is my favourite book on 2 Corinthians, written by Jonathan Lamb, who's preached several times at this church, and it's called integrity. It's not a commentary as such. Jonathan has written a great commentary. It isn't a commentary as such, but it's taking the theme of integrity, particularly integrity and leadership, and exploring how that is brought out in 2 Corinthians.

And Jonathan identifies three marks of integrity. I think there's three marks that Paul's bringing before us in our passage this morning. The first of these is sincerity.

It is about our motivation. Are we doing things to build up the church and for the benefit of others, or are we doing them for ourselves?

[32 : 11] Are we doing things so that we win the praise of humans, or are we doing things so that we win the commendation of God? Paul's motivation were to develop the mind and character of Christ and to build up the body of Christ.

His motives were sincere. The second part of integrity is consistency, what Lamb calls living life as a whole. Paul's opponents accused him of inconsistency between his writings and his visits.

But Paul says, no, in verse 11, what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we're present. Paul says, by taking every thought captive, he's able constantly to be obedient to Christ and to live a consistent Christian life.

And then the third thing is reliability, reflecting God's faithfulness. It would have been very easy for Paul to turn his back on the church in Corinth and to say, I'm having nothing more to do with it.

He could move on to other churches that might be a bit more receptive to what he had to say. But no, he'd committed himself to the church, to boarding it up, and he was going to see it through.

[33 : 25] He was faithful not just to God, but to the church as well, and even willing to change his plans to meet its needs. So can I challenge us? Are we people of integrity, of sincerity, of consistency, of reliability?

And let me end with two American presidents. Barack Obama and Jimmy Carter. Whatever you think of their politics, I think these two are widely regarded as men who had integrity, who had compassion.

As you probably know, Jimmy Carter died towards the end of last year. He drove her 100. And I think the best tribute I saw to him came from Barack Obama. Obama's tribute highlighted the fact that Jimmy Carter was a Christian, indeed, that he preached quite regularly in the Baptist church that he attended.

As an aside, Jimmy Carter a few weeks ago won his fourth Grammy for some of his sermons that he preached at that church. Barack Obama said this about Carter.

He believed some things were more important than re-election. Things like integrity, respect, and compassion. Jimmy Carter believed that we are all created in God's image.

[34 : 46] He didn't just profess these values. He embodied them. And in doing so, he taught all of us what it means to live a life of grace, dignity, justice, and service.

That's a wonderful tribute, isn't it? I wonder if it could be said of us. Do we have integrity in our lives?

