

Real Ministry

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. Let me add my welcome to those of Craig and others who have been up here. And my name's Archie. If we haven't met, I'm one of the pastors in training here. And I also work part-time, most of you know this, for a church down in Peebles.

Incidentally, your pastor, Graham, some of you will have noticed he's not here. He's actually preaching for us down in Peebles right now, which is just a wonderful illustration, isn't it, of our partnership together in the gospel.

And we come together this morning to 2 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians, as Anne has just read for us, please do get that open. And if you haven't already got it in front of you, please get it in front of you. And as you do that, I'm just going to pray once more for us before we come to God's word together.

Heavenly Father, I pray so much this morning that in my weakness, Jesus, your power would be evident. That you would speak even through little old me by your spirit this morning for your glory.

Amen. Amen. And I wonder if you've seen Drive to Survive. And today actually is the first Formula One race of the 2025 season.

[1 : 0 9] And honestly, for me, I've never been able to get into Formula One. I don't really get it. Just hours and hours of racing round and round in a circle. I don't find that very entertaining. But I don't know if you've seen Drive to Survive.

Because it really does bring Formula One to life. It's much more interesting when you know all the drama and the background and the stories. But one of the things that I still can't really understand, right?

You get a driver like Lewis Hamilton. And he's arguably the best to have ever done it. But it's very easy to say, well, he wouldn't have won any of those races.

He only really won them because he was in the Mercedes. And that was the fastest car. Like, is Lewis Hamilton really the best driver? Or is it just that he got lucky and got to drive the fast car?

If you want to know if Lewis Hamilton is actually a really strong driver, you'd have to take him out of the fastest car. If you want to know that he's really that good.

[2 : 0 8] At this season, he has moved to Ferrari. But if you put him in the Renault or the Honda or one of the other cars that just constantly struggles. And then he kept winning races. Well, then we'd know, wouldn't we?

That he's a really good driver. Why are we talking about Formula One and Lewis Hamilton? Well, it's like this. Like I say, if you want to know how strong a driver Hamilton is, then putting him in a weak car is going to be a good way to display his strength.

And it's kind of like that with God in our passage. If God's strength is going to be on display, well, then it makes absolute sense for him to work through weakness, through weak people like you and like me.

A bit like Lewis Hamilton in one of the rubbish cars. And that's really the main point of this passage this morning. I think we had that previewed for us with Craig last week. As Paul compared himself to and warned against these so-called super apostles.

And Paul is going to pick that theme up again, probably most clearly articulated, actually, when we get to chapter 12. And chapter 12, verse 9, God speaks to Paul and he says, It's a strange statement that.

[3 : 26] Right? I mean, maybe to some of us it's so familiar that it's lost its strangeness. But think about it. Power in weakness. That makes no sense. Those are opposite things. But it is really important for us.

In fact, we need to see this morning. This is a really good thing. That's central to how the gospel functions. That this is how God is at work in the world today. Not in things that look impressive or strong.

But in things that are broken and struggling and real and human. Maybe you're here this morning and you're not a Christian.

And maybe you're just checking us out as a church. And you really need to know from the Bible this morning, God loves you. And he wants you to come to him this morning. But not because you're strong.

Not because he's recognized something in you and thinks that you're going to be useful to him. Not because of your potential. But because you, just like all of us in the room, just like me, are broken and struggling and real and human.

[4 : 40] And he wants to work in you to bring healing and forgiveness and freedom. And even in your weakness, he wants to work through you to release those things in other people too.

And if you're a Christian in the room, please, please, please never get tired of this message. Never forget. Never move on from this. The strength is Christ.

The power is God. The message is the gospel. Yes, he wants you to grow and to discover your gifts and to serve him with them. But in all of that, he wants you to know really the fundamental growth in the Christian faith.

And all of that is not into your own strength. But to know your weakness and to move more and more into dependence on him. For he is strong.

So that's where we're going this morning. We're going to tackle the text that Anne read for us under three headings. Real ministry is costly. Real ministry looks weak. And real ministry points to Jesus.

[5 : 45] Before we do that, that's where we're going. Where have we been? We're in this letter. What's this letter all about? As Paul writes to the church in Corinth. Corinth. And we've seen this is the fourth letter that Paul has written that we know about to this church.

And we only have two of them in our Bibles. But this is the fourth. And Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth has been pretty rocky. He established the church there. But they have been drifting from his teaching in various ways.

And Paul has been confronting that. He's written to confront that with letters. Even tearful letters. He's visited them. He's even decided that it would be too painful to visit them again.

And in this letter in 2 Corinthians, it can be hard to tell, I think, in this letter, whether Paul is now happy with them and the progress that they're making. Or whether he's confronting them.

Because this letter contains kind of a bit of both of those things. I think it's as if they're moving in the right direction. But they're still sort of slightly on the fence about Paul. And in this letter, he's saying, you've got to get on board.

[6 : 47] He's saying, I am the real deal. A true apostle. A certified messenger of Christ. My ministry is legit. And legit ministry looks like mine.

And so he's saying, are you with me? And we saw last week, not just are you with me, but therefore are you not with them? Not with the super apostles that we met in the first half of this chapter.

Those super impressive looking teachers that Paul says are false. They are even, we saw really strong words last week, servants of Satan. And so he says to us this morning, as if Paul is directly addressing us as a church and as individuals, he's saying, are you with me?

Are you prepared to get on board? To get behind and be involved in this proper gospel ministry? So that's where we've been. And as I say, we've got three headings for this morning.

But you might be asking, just as you look at those headings, what is ministry? What is gospel ministry? And just to quickly and briefly answer that question, I found this book enormously helpful.

[7 : 49] It's clear that Craig has too, because he quoted from it at the start of our service. We actually came to it independently this week. But I find myself coming back to this book often. And the authors have developed this metaphor that Craig was describing of a trellis and a vine.

A trellis is all that supports the vine. And the vine, the growth of which is really the priority, is the people. And so they say this, similar to the quote that Craig gave us at the beginning.

The basic work of any Christian ministry is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of God's spirit. And to see people converted, changed and grow to maturity in that gospel.

That's vine work, as they define it. And then they go on and they say, just as some sort of framework is needed to help a vine grow, so Christian ministries also need some structure and support.

It might not be much, but at the very least, we need somewhere to meet and some Bibles to read from, some basic structures of leadership within our group, and that's the trellis. And I just find that illustration enormously helpful, because it shows us the breadth of what gospel ministry is.

[8 : 59] It's not just the staff team and the Sunday sermon and the elders or the growth group leader or the public evangelist, but any time that we speak the word of God in the power of the spirit, that might be a small word over coffee after the sermon this morning.

It might be with a neighbor over the garden fence or with a parent at the school gate, or as you wait for the microwave to go ding at work.

And any time we do anything to support that, which might be making the coffee this morning, or helping fix something at church, or just putting the Bibles out, the point is, and the point of this book, Trellis and the Vine, is that Christian ministry is for everyone.

To be a Christian is to be involved in this in some way, not just to turn up to church on a Sunday and sit in the pew and take it all in. But Paul says to us this morning, are you prepared to follow in my footsteps?

And it's into a pattern of ministry that is costly and that looks weak, but that ultimately points to Jesus. I don't know if you noticed as it was read, I think Anne did an excellent job, because those first few verses are dripping with irony and sarcasm.

[10 : 19] We saw the super apostles last week, and their pattern of ministry was one of boasting. Of pointing to their own credentials, their own strength, their own qualifications.

You might have noticed how much that word boasting is repeated in this letter, and particularly in this chapter. And in those first few verses, Paul says, I can play that game. Verse 18, if they're going to boast, I can boast too.

You put up with their foolish boasting, maybe if I boast like them, then you'll come back to me. Verse 21, second half of verse 21, if they boast, well, I can be foolish too.

I'll speak like a fool. I will boast. And he does that in verse 22. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.

The super apostles seem to love to have pointed to their heritage, right? In the very early church, in places like Corinth, lots of people who weren't Jews were starting to follow Jesus.

[11 : 16] But it was, really, it still is a very Jewish faith. It's rooted in the Old Testament, in Jewish scriptures. Jesus was a Jew. And so the super apostles were boasting.

We're Jewish too. They like to point to their origins. Paul says, I can do that. But then he continues, are they servants or ministers of Christ?

I am more. They had been boasting in the work that they do for Jesus. But then halfway through verse 23, I think Paul's tone really changes.

Changes from that kind of sarcastic irony. But we get in brackets. He says, I'm out of my mind to talk like this. And then what follows is this unexpected description of what it means to be a real servant or minister of Christ.

And so we see there first that real ministry is costly. Just look at how costly it was for Paul. He's been in prison. He's been flogged.

[12 : 20] He's been exposed to death. He's been lashed by the Jews, beaten with rods, pelted with stones. He's been shipwrecked three times, spent a day and a night on the open seas.

He's always on the move, in danger from rivers and bandits and Jews and Gentiles. In the city, in the country, on the sea, he's gone without sleep. He's hungry, thirsty, cold, naked.

Don't skip over those details. See how costly real ministry is. Paul's ministry is. It's brutal. Can you imagine being whipped 49 times?

Each impact worse than the last. Blood dripping down your back. Scarred. Literally scarred for life. Imagine being at sea for a full day and night.

Maybe picture the Titanic film, Jack and Rose, on that floating door. Can I just say, definitely enough room for both of them. But maybe that gives you an idea. Think of Paul just clinging to a piece of driftwood like that in the freezing cold sea.

[13 : 27] Right through the dark of night, terrified. See, real ministry is costly. I think we have to imagine that the super apostles that we met last week, these super impressive looking teachers were, we know they were preaching to gain a following and to earn money.

But afraid of the cost. And preaching a gospel in that kind of pattern. And you know, there are those today with a similar message. It can be very obvious.

That kind of give us your money and God will multiply it back to you. A gospel that says you're going to be blessed according to your faithfulness. That the material prosperity and physical health are God's good plan for you.

But it can be much more subtle than that. And much more likely, I think more dangerous is a gospel that simply says, you know, God wants your best. He wants you to flourish and to prosper.

And so if you come to him with all of your needs, all of the things that you think you need, and we'll pray for you, and God is going to heal your physical problems. He's going to provide for you financially because he doesn't want you to suffer.

[14 : 37] He's a good, kind, and loving God. And look, it's not wrong to pray for those material things. We absolutely should pray for them. But we have to pray for them, knowing that it might not be in God's plan to remove our suffering in this life.

In fact, very often, just like for Paul, God is actually most at work when it costs us the most in our suffering. That's real ministry.

It's costly. And so, can you ask yourself this morning, what am I prepared to do to make Christ known? You know, could my next house move be to somewhere with a real need for the gospel?

Jason, this is going to embarrass him, but many of you know Jason. He's just recently bought a house down in Peebles. And there is a cost associated with that for him. I know that he loves living in the city.

Here in Edinburgh, he loves this church. But he has just recently invested basically everything that he has, materially speaking, in this move to Peebles, so that he can be involved in the ministry there.

[15 : 47] It's costly for him, costly in lots of ways. For some others of you in the room, I know right now, you are facing the real practical and painful consequences of that cost.

The cost of serving God. I just want to encourage you this morning that I know that's not easy. I know that that can be really hard. But you are in good company because Paul's ministry was costly.

In fact, real ministry is costly. And you know, for lots of us in the room, I don't want to overstep here. But I'm sure that for most of us, following Jesus just hasn't been all that costly.

I'm not sure it's been all that costly for me, to be honest. I've been reading a book about this guy called Samuel Rutherford, who was a pastor here in Scotland in the 1600s.

He was famous for writing amazing letters to other Christians in the nation. Christians who are standing for truth at a time where it was up for grabs. And lots of the people that he wrote letters to paid the ultimate cost for following Jesus and died for it.

[17 : 01] What does it cost you? I'm not saying that we should be looking for trouble. But if it comes, what are you prepared for it to cost? What if it was going to cost you your life?

Or some element of your health? Would you take a greatest sort of financial sacrifice than you currently are bearing? What if it cost you your social standing?

Have you lost some friends over it? What if it cost you your freedom and you ended up in prison? What are we prepared for it to cost? Because real ministry can be costly.

Secondly, secondly, real ministry looks weak. See what Paul says in verse 28. Look at verse 28 with me.

Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Paul hasn't got it all together. He isn't like a visionary leader with a great plan.

[18 : 00] He isn't on top of all the problems in the churches that he's planted and feels responsible for. Every day, he feels the pressure of that concern. Very often, I come into the office here and I ask Graham and Cater how they're doing.

And this is true of Pete and Craig too, by the way, but they're much harder to turn into a cartoon than Graham and Cater were. But I ask them how they're doing. And maybe there's been an elders meeting or a difficult pastoral visit or someone has shared something challenging with one of them.

Maybe one of you is suffering. And as I ask them how they are, you can just see the pain of that in their eyes, the challenge of that care and responsibility that they feel for each and every one of you.

I'm sure if you serve on the pastoral care team or you're responsible for some element of children's work, maybe especially for our elders here at Brunsfield, they share that burden as they seek to love and care for you.

And that really does mean sleepless nights. It really does mean tearful eyes. And maybe you can pray for me as I increasingly feel the responsibility of that down in Peebles.

[19 : 09] It looks weak. It is weak. But that's real ministry. Paul just says it really clearly in verse 30. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

And he then illustrates his weakness, I think. In verse 32, he says, In Damascus, the governor under King Aratus has the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me.

But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. Paul had caused such a stir in his sharing of the gospel in Damascus that the governor had shut the whole place down.

And you can read about it in Acts chapter 9. No way in, no way out, got to catch Paul. As you know, in the Roman army, one of the greatest decorations that could be bestowed upon you was called the Corona Morales.

And you won it. It was a sort of crown and you won it for being the first to scale the walls in a siege. It was one of the highest military honors that you could receive. But here, Paul, in his weakness, it's like the anti-Corona Morales.

[20 : 18] He doesn't scale the walls to take the city and to bring the gospel and triumphantly plant a church in Damascus. No, in his weakness, he's let down the walls in a basket to flee the city.

It's humiliating. This basket that ought to have been carrying fruit or whatever else you put in a basket. And there's Paul in it, humiliated. And Paul boasts in this because he boasts in his weakness.

So how do you feel about your weaknesses? And maybe especially when it comes to your weakness in serving the church. I think there are two dangers that we might fall into here.

Some of us may be tempted to hide our weaknesses, which is really just quite obviously the opposite of what Paul is encouraging us to do, covering up our floors because we don't want anyone to know how weak we are.

Others of us might be very willing to have our weakness right out there, like Paul to boast in them, but taking it further than Paul and making it so central to who we are that actually it stops us from serving God.

[21 : 26] And maybe this is you. You don't think that you know the Bible well enough so you can't serve in kids' church or help lead a Bible study. You don't have enough answers so you could never share the gospel with someone who doesn't know Jesus.

You're not very good at public speaking so you could never lead us in prayer or read for us, certainly never preach. You feel yourself to be quite an awkward sort of person so you could never be on the welcome team.

Paul does boast in his weakness, but crucially in his weakness, he serves God because he knows that real Christian ministry is supposed to look weak.

And do you know it's much better that the real Christian ministry is carried out in weakness. I know we think that it would work best if it looked impressive, that if we wanted to gather a crowd, I know logic would tell us that we have to have excellence in everything, brilliant music and the best coffee in town and excellent teaching.

And look, there is no harm in doing things excellently. But it's okay. In fact, it's good when things go wrong, when our weakness is on display.

[22 : 40] Why? Because it proves, it shows that it's not about us. Real ministry looks weak weak.

And that's a really good thing. But you know, I've chosen my words quite carefully here when I say that it looks weak because it does in fact contain real power.

And that leads us to our final point, that real ministry points to Jesus. You might remember a couple of weeks ago with Ian, we were in chapter 10. And in chapter 10, Paul says this, if you look back at verse 17 of chapter 10, he says, let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

And you might have a little footnote there to tell you that Paul is quoting from Jeremiah. And let me just read what Paul is quoting from. Jeremiah says this, let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches.

But let the one who boasts boast about this, that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on the earth.

[23 : 54] For in these I delight, declares the Lord. It's clear that the super apostles in Corinth love to boast in their wisdom and strength and riches.

They've been boasting about their authority and their power. But Paul, he boasts, as we've seen in our passage in verse 30, in his weakness. Why? Why does Paul do that?

Why does Paul boast in his weakness? Well, I take it that, as in chapter 10, to boast in his weakness is the same as to boast in the Lord or it is so that he can boast in the Lord.

Because his ministry, being weak, points to Jesus who is strong. Come to chapter 12 with me. We've seen already in verse 9, but let me read just a little bit more from there.

But he said to me, that is God saying to Paul, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, Paul says, responding to what God has said to him, therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me.

[25 : 03] That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Real ministry is costly, right? Hardships and persecutions and difficulties, they will come. And therefore, real ministry looks weak. It looks weak, but in its apparent weakness, in the appearance of weakness, in human cost and weakness, the power and strength of Christ is on display.

Again, that might seem counterintuitive. We might think that by being impressive, we would make Jesus attractive. But remember, this is the way of the gospel.

This has always been the way of the gospel, right? Nowhere more apparent than at the center of it all at the cross, where the God of the universe, the most powerful, the strongest, when he became man, he really did take on human weakness.

And he displayed that weakness, even to the point of that humiliating death on a cross. Would you picture him there? Picture Jesus hanging on the cross at Calvary.

[26 : 14] Does he look strong to you? No. He looks defeated and broken and weak. Do you know what he was doing?

In that moment, he took all of the sin of the world on his shoulders. The human being, Jesus Christ, paid the ultimate price in his weakness.

But as he looked weak, he was achieving the greatest victory. He looked weak, but he was triumphing in glory. He looked weak, but in his weakness, God was strong.

And he proved it by rising him from the dead. This is real ministry. It points to Jesus. It boasts in Jesus.

It's all about Jesus. Maybe you're here and you're relatively new. Maybe you're looking for a church to settle in. It'd be wonderful if you decide to stay here. I've got no skin in the game.

[27 : 17] I'm about to leave, but this is an excellent church. But if you don't decide to settle here, can I implore you, please find a church that is all about Jesus.

Not a church that is all about experiences. Not a church where the sermons are all about the church's vision. But find a church that is just relentlessly pointing people to the grace that is available in Christ.

A church that is willing not to talk themselves up, but a church that is willing to count the cost and own their weakness and to point to Jesus' victory.

Because again, it feels counterintuitive, but how weakness, it really does point to Jesus. And Sam Albury puts it like this. I've quoted this exact quote from here at least once before, but it's gold.

So I'm going to say it again. I don't need to look good so that Jesus can look good. I need to be honest about my colossal spiritual needs so that he can look all sufficient.

[28 : 22] Can I just speak personally for a moment? Because honestly, I find this really hard. At my character, everything inside of me, I want to back myself, to be confident and know my strengths and to be strong and to serve like that.

And I want people to be attracted to Jesus. I want my friends who don't know him, to know him. And it just feels as though if I look like I'm living a really good life and if I'm impressive and have all the answers, it just feels like that would help.

But this passage has really challenged me this week because it's uncomfortable for me. But as I reflect on my ministry, do you know, it's always been in moments of weakness that God has most clearly been at work.

Simple things like preaching sermons when I've been really ill or tired and it's felt kind of rubbish but then it's seemed to bear real fruit and I've received massive encouragement off the back of it.

Or conversations where I was way out of my depth and I didn't have any of the answers. I had to just keep saying I don't know but it turned out to be a breakthrough for someone. Or moments of stupidity and sinfulness that have turned into opportunities to point to the grace that Christ has extended to me and the forgiveness that I rely on day by day.

[29 : 46] It's just true that real ministry it's weakness. It's not about me but opportunities to point to Jesus. And so do you feel yourself to be weak this morning?

Do you know yourself to be a struggling sinner? Do you have a colossal spiritual need? Because if you do that is excellent and do not hide it but come to him.

He is all sufficient. His grace is sufficient. Sufficient to forgive. Sufficient to set free. Sufficient to enable and empower your ministry even and especially when you're not strong enough to do it on your own.

And so point to him. Because that is what real ministry does. We started this morning by thinking about Formula One Lewis Hamilton winning races in the fastest car which is impressive but how much more impressive would it be if he won races in the rubbish car?

Then we would know wouldn't we that Lewis Hamilton was a truly great driver. And just so if God just always used super impressive and gifted people well it wouldn't make God look so glorious it wouldn't shine a light on his strength it would shine a light on theirs.

[31 : 09] But by using weak sinful people like me and like you people who have to and only can serve in utter dependence on him it is then that we begin to see a God who is truly powerful.

we've seen that real ministry is costly that it looks weak and that it points to Jesus. And in all of that the message to the church in Corinth is get on board with Paul.

This is what his ministry looked like it's not what the super apostles looked like but it's what real authentic approved by God ministry looks like and he says the very same thing to us this morning.

Are we willing to get on board with real gospel ministry ministry? It won't be easy it might very well be costly and it will look weak but it's good because it points to Jesus who is strong.