

1 Corinthians 4:1-2

by Gerry Covenhoven

The sermon emphasizes the importance of faithfulness as stewards of God's grace, modeled by the Apostle Paul, and highlights the role of suffering in spiritual growth.

Duration: 45:47

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:3-14, 2 Corinthians 7:5-7

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Gods Grace"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of being prepared and open to receiving messages from the Lord. They mention that sometimes, no one is prepared for the evening meetings, but with the ability to change, they can still find something from the Lord. The speaker refers to 2 Corinthians 7:5, where the Apostle Paul talks about the inward struggles and fears they faced in Macedonia. However, they were comforted by God through the coming of tidings and the consolation they received from the believers. The sermon emphasizes the need to have the nature of Christ and to be optimistic, even when facing challenges in the world. The speaker also mentions the concept of grace and how God called them to reveal His Son in them. They encourage the listeners to examine themselves and their offerings to the Lord, and to come with an empty heart, hoping to be filled by others who have also emptied themselves.

Transcript

Before we turn to the subject of our next conclusion, our next class, while something was going on as we were going home in the car and my son took me to class, I had made a statement that he had not understood, and he thought that I was expressing certain racist sentiments. We were talking there in chapter 9 concerning the curse against Hades. Now, the confusion there comes oftentimes not distinguishing between Ham and King.

Now, the curse was upon King, not upon Ham. Ham was the father, one of the three sons of Noah, and then Ham had four sons, and King was to be a servant of servants, and was to be a servant of Sam and a servant of Jacob. And we mentioned that Ham is the father of the black races of Africa.

Now, then, this does not mean, then, that Ham and the black races come under the curse. Now, that's not in there, and I didn't say that I did. I didn't say that they did, but the way I worded it, I guess it looked as though I might have implied that.

But of the fourth son, Canaan, his descendants inhabited the land of Palestine, and they, then, became a degraded people. And the curse did come upon them, but it was only upon that limited part of the descendants of Ham. Now, then, of course, we know the way some people have taken that curse that Noah pronounced upon Canaan and have applied it to all of the children of Ham, so that they say that all of the black are an inferior people and things of this nature.

But, of course, that is not in the text at all. And that is not what God said. God said that only Canaan of the children of Ham was to be cursed and his descendants.

And that was so because of their degradation, their moral perverseness. And this was fulfilled, then, in the conquering of the land of Canaan and the destruction of Canaan from those people, and those people becoming servants of the Israelite people as they occupied the land, particularly under Joshua and then under David and under Solomon. So, then, just clarifying that in case I left a question mark in the minds of some who were here this morning as to exactly what was meant in saying that these descendants of Canaan were cursed.

But, then, I did mention also Ham, and I suppose that some were confused by the crossing between Ham and Canaan. Let's open our Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 4. Read verses 1 and 2 here. 1 Corinthians chapter 4, verses 1 and 2. Paul says, Let a man so account of us as of the ministry of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.

It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful. I believe we will all accept the fact that not only such as Paul, an apostle, and other apostles are stewards of God, but that all of us are stewards of God. All who have been saved by the grace of God are stewards, and are called upon then to be stewards of all that God has given us.

And in this stewardship, we are called upon to be faithful. Now, our subject this evening, the title that is given outside, is Touchstones Touching Fidelity. Fidelity, of course, is faithfulness.

Now, this word, touchstone, perhaps we can clarify that. A touchstone is, first of all, a stone. It is a black stone that is allied to cement, and it is used to test the purity of gold and silver.

That is, it is a test that used to be used. Maybe it's not used now because of other methods that have been developed. But they used to be able to take this black touchstone and rub gold or silver, or what purported to be gold or silver, on it, and then looking at that touchstone, whatever come off, they could distinguish now as to the purity or lack of purity of the gold or the silver.

So then, this word touchstone came to be any test or criterion by which a thing is measured as to its quality. So then, in speaking about touchstones from the Scriptures, we would like to look at some things that God uses to measure us by, shall we say. Things that God uses and brings before us in the Scriptures that would measure us as to our fidelity toward Him.

Are we faithful? Do we walk with the Lord as we should walk? And I trust that if you consider these things this evening, the Holy Spirit of God will speak to us and show us perhaps areas in which we fall down, as we'll be considering a number of different areas, that I think may be helpful to us. First of all, we'd like to look at Paul himself as a touchstone. Now, we saw there in chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians that he speaks of himself as a fluid, and that it is required of fluids to be faithful.

Well, in chapter 11 and verse 1, the Apostle Paul says, Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. In other words, Paul is telling us, Look, follow me.

What you see me do, that do. What you see in me, keep to imitate that. Keep to apply this in your own life.

Now, this is a tremendous thing. How many today would dare to say, Be ye imitators of me? And yet, the Apostle Paul could, and it's no boasting. It's inspiration by the Spirit of God.

But, the Apostle Paul has such a life, so completely dedicated and faithful to the Lord, that he could say this an absolutely amazing and daring statement to men. And yet, I repeat, it is by inspiration that the Apostle Paul wrote this. Well, in considering then the Apostle Paul, measuring ourselves by him, to what extent do we measure up? Now, of course, we will not bring in factors that have to do with his Apostleship.

That peculiar calling that was his, because that would bring him out into a sphere that would not apply equally to all of us. But, let us seek to find some things in the life of the Apostle Paul that I do believe have their application to all of us. Now, in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 10, As to what the Apostle said, be ye imitators of me, as I also am trying to present here, but by the grace of God I am what I am.

And his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain. But I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. And here we can see the secret of what Paul says is in his life, working in such a mighty and abundant way, that he can say, be imitators of me, even as I also am trying.

What was the secret? Not Paul. Not Paul's learning. Not Paul's faithfulness as such.

Not that Paul was one who was better able to apply these things to his life than others. It was simply the grace of God working mightily in him. Now, that grace is released in every one of us.

And in various portions that we're going to consider this evening, we're going to consider this grace. And how this grace wrought mightily in Paul and can work mightily in us. This is what the Apostle Paul is genuinely in his various letters.

What one sees in him can be imitated, can be applied, can be practiced, can be experienced in the life of every born-again child of God. You have no excuse to say, well, Paul was just one who was able to attain that which most Christians just cannot attain. God simply says it is possible for him to attain the same as Paul did, insofar as his faithful Christian life is concerned, insofar as his faithfulness to the Lord was concerned, insofar as him being available to the Lord to be used is concerned.

Not that we all have the same gift. Not that we all have the same training. Not that we all have the same calling.

But we all have the same grace. And this is a basic underlying factor that we need to keep in mind. And so the Apostle Paul, speaking about all that God was working through him, he says that his grace which was bestowed upon him is not in vain.

We will notice a little bit more about that in just a moment. But the point is that we have received all of our good gifts. Now, in 2 Corinthians 6, verses 1 and 3, we then, as worshers together with him, with God, preach to you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.

And, of course, when he says, we teach you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain, it shows that a Christian can receive the grace of God in vain. And he desires that they not receive it in vain. So then, here's the thing that Sue and I have to say.

It is very possible to be born again by the grace of God. It is very possible to experience the measure of the grace of God working in our lives. But it is possible, at the same time, to fail to manifest the full manifestations of the grace of God in our lives.

And how many times do we have to consult, as we look back at some things in the past in our lives, that we fail to look? Simply because perhaps we do not avail ourselves of the grace of God at the moment. That was necessary. Now, that's in the context.

We're looking at verse 4 of this same sentence here, a word that we all know so well. He says, "...I have heard thee in a time expected, and in the day of salvation have I suffered thee. Behold, now is the expected time.

Behold, now is the day of salvation." Now, this is a beautiful prophecy that comes from Isaiah 49, and in that chapter 49 he's speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ, so that this word, this quotation from Isaiah 49, is applied first to the Lord Jesus Christ, but then the apostle applies it to Christians in general, because we are in Christ, and that the Lord Jesus Christ, as a man here on earth, was availing himself, or perhaps we see, rather availing himself as a man. This is something that I bring out continually, and I think that we need to continually keep in mind as we consider the Lord Jesus Christ, as we will in a moment, more in detail, but as we consider him, we recognize that he was one, so he was God manifested in the flesh. All of his deity, and all that applied to deity, was so completely veiled that he did not utilize his own personal deity and power in his life here on earth.

The scriptures are continually teaching us, concerning the life of Christ, that all that he did was through his fulness and power of the Holy Spirit of God himself. The same as you and I need and can do as human beings here in the world. It was not that the Lord Jesus Christ laid aside his deity.

No, for he laid aside the manifestations of his deity, and so his entire life, and his whole life here, lived in dependence upon God. Now, then, in that connection, the apostle Paul is taking this, and he's applying this word that was originally given through the Lord Jesus Christ personally, by prophecy, through Isaiah, and he's applying this then to all Christians. For he said, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I heard thee.

Behold, now is the accepted time. Behold, now is the day of salvation. Now, the latter part of this verse is continually preached of in relation to the proclamation of the gospel.

When we proclaim the gospel, which many times will tell the unbeliever, now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation, now is the day that you can be saved. Well, of course, it has that affirmation, but that's not primarily what he's talking about. What he's talking about, first of all, is today is the day of salvation, when you and I can spread the news of salvation.

This is the context. And it is only if you and I utilize the grace of God that has been placed at our disposal, that has seen us, that has seen us personally, and has chosen us, each of us individually, to be witnesses of the Lord, and it is only as we do not avail ourselves of that, in other words, we receive the grace of God in vain, we do not take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves to us there today and give

us the news, in our last days of the gospel to us. Receiving the grace of God in vain, in not being faithful in getting things right, receiving the grace of God in vain, in not telling those around us what Christ means to us.

So many different ways, because today is the day of salvation, and today is the day that we can proclaim God's salvation to the people around us. God's grace, as might be recalled, will be demonstrated to him whose age has not been pre-destroyed in vain. Such it is in relation to the gospel message that has been committed here.

But then in Philippians chapter 1, we have quite another thing that the Apostle Paul, as we say, has been manifested in him that he wants to be manifested in us. Now, the Apostle Paul then has a touchstone here in relation to something else. Philippians chapter 1, verses 29 and 30.

He says, For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake, having the same affliction which he saw in me and now hears it in me. Now, the Apostle Paul is saying, look, I know it's not an easy thing to witness of Christ. I know because I have suffered much for the witness of Christ.

I know because I have suffered many afflictions because of the witness of Christ. But he says, Now it is given unto you not only to believe in his name, something that God has granted you as a favor, but also to suffer afflictions for his needs. And he says, Now this is a very strange statement that he gives to the Apostle Paul, that God would grant unto us to suffer for his needs.

And yet, isn't it the trial, the fire that purifies the gold in his table? And God knows that this sort of thing is necessary in order to purify us as well. And God knows that if we're to enter into a rich inheritance in his presence and enter into it in all of its fullness in the way that he desires for us, there must be purifying in our lives. And one of our troubles today is that we are afraid to suffer and to experience tribulation for the glory of Christ.

We live in a society of ease. Even in this day, it is, well, it's a common thing. It's a thing that everybody is talking about to be a Christian, to perpetuate the so-called evangelical interpretation of the Scriptures.

For we believe the Bible to be the divinely inspired word of God, and we believe that the Lord Jesus Christ in shedding his blood upon the cross made atonement. And so we need to render unto, to commit ourselves to him and trust him as our Lord and Savior in order that we might be saved. This is the message that we preach.

But you know, there are some people that will talk about this message. And some people that will make us suffer because of this message. But it is granted unto us.

It is a thing that God in his grace has granted to us that in witnessing for him, there will be some who will talk in order that we might be purified from those things which will hinder us in our Christian life and in our ability to appreciate the blessings of God in us. There was conflict involved. There were things that he suffered for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he says that it is granted unto us, it's given on behalf of Christ to suffer for his sake. I believe he's brought this out in the past that this idea of something for the sake of Christ really means for the love of Christ. If we truly love the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be willing to stick our necks out for him and to suffer for him and to experience any sort of conflict because of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ when we

repeat what he says in him.

But then moving on to another aspect of things in 2 Corinthians chapter 12, beginning at verse 7. 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 7. The Apostle Paul now has a touchstone in an entirely different area. Not simply in the area of gospel witness and testifying for Christ, but here in another area. The Apostle Paul says here in 2 Corinthians 12, 7, Unless I should be exalted above measure to the abundance of the revelations there was given unto me a thorn in the flesh.

The messenger of Satan should buck at me lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord Christ that it might depart from me. He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength, the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ, is made perfect in business.

Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessity, in persecution, in distresses for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong.

The paradox of the system is live by the grace of God when I am weak, then I am strong. But here the Apostle Paul is dealing mainly, though he applies this in virtually every area of life, he's dealing mainly with this thorn in the flesh. What was Paul's thorn in the flesh? Well, happily, the Bible doesn't say.

Some think it was a sickness. Some think it was especially eye sickness. Because of what he says to the Galatians.

He says that when I was among you, why, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me if it were at all possible. And then he ends up that little reddifying thing. See, there's such large, bloody thorns around you.

And so he won't pluck them, so sometimes I'm sick. Whether that was it or not, we have no way of really knowing. Others think it was malaria.

And they think that Paul was suffering from recurrent attacks of malaria, which certainly, in his missionary travels, he had gone through lands that, even to today, are malarial lands. And so he may have been suffering with it during his time of certain wars. But it may not have been a particularly physical infirmity.

It might have been a real infirmity. It might have been something quite different. Of course, we don't know.

But it was anything that, on the natural realm, on the material realm, would be limiting to him. It was something that allowed Paul to assert his personality and his drive and his intelligence. It was something that made Paul remember, Paul, you're sitting next to me.

You're a vessel to be filled. You are one whom God wants to thank, and you. But if you're going to be continually dwelling upon these wonderful revelations of God, you're going to be actually puffed up with pride.

And so that anything that would puff one up to think more of themselves than they ought to think, it needs some kind of a soul in the flesh in order to bring one down and bow before the Lord in order that we might be transformed entirely from here and recognize that, indeed, we have all things, but in itself we have nothing. From here now, many Christians, we stop at some different reflections. And what do we change concerning these reflections? Do we chafe under them? Do we say, well, now, why do I have to have this

reflection when hardly any of the other Christians have similar reflections? And is there a dissatisfaction with God's dearly beloved for measuring ourselves by Paul as a substance? He would say, the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ came to me and said, my strength is made perfect in Jesus.

So Paul said, therefore I'll glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me. You know, that's a tremendous attitude to take. Frankly, I haven't had to go through things like that.

I mean, I suppose I've had my share of sickness, but nothing chronic, nothing that has continually gotten me down. And yet there are some of the saints of God that have suffered from such things as arthritis, not only in their old age, but even as younger people, and continual pain day after day after day. And what does this mean to them? That some of them have really learned to glorify the Lord in their sufferings, as the Apostle Paul learned to glorify the Lord in his affliction, recognizing that here too in such an affliction the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ has a touchstone.

This is something else that we can keep in mind. But then, another thing that I'd like to mention concerning the Apostle Paul here in 2 Corinthians chapter 2, something that is not quite so obvious on the surface of things, of 2 Corinthians chapter 2, beginning in verse 12, he says, Furthermore, when I came this far to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit because I found not my brothers, but taking my leave of them, I went from sin into salvation. Now, thanks be unto God, which always causes us to triumph in Christ, and make us manifest the favor of His knowledge by us in every day.

Paul had an open door before him. Coming to the city of Provence, God gave him an open door, and it was a wonderful opportunity that the Apostle Paul had for serving the Lord. So what did he do? Did he stay in Provence? Did he take advantage of that open door? No, he said, I had no rest in my spirit because I found not my brothers, but taking leave of them, abandoning this open door.

He says, I went from sin into salvation. So what did he say? I failed the Lord. I'm discerning.

I did the wrong thing. No. He says in verse 14, Now, thanks be unto God, which always causes us to triumph in Christ.

Paul, by the grace of God, was an optimist. He was a man that could look at things that, although it turned out that it was entirely unnecessary for him to abandon this open door, as we will explain in just a moment, it turned out to be entirely unnecessary. He wasn't going to bemoan the fact that he had abandoned an open door.

He says, God always causes us to triumph in Christ. Now, then, just to tie in a few loose threads here, in chapter 7 of this famous epistle, he gives us a few more details as to what happened. We begin here at verse 5. Second Corinthians, chapter 7, verse 5. He says, For when we came into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side.

Within were fighting. Without were fighting. Within were fears.

Nevertheless, God, that comforted those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus. And not by his coming only, but by the consolation wherewith he was comforted in you, when he told us, Your earnest desire, your mourning, your fervent mind toward me, so that I rejoice some more. Now, let's tie these things together and piece together exactly what had happened.

Paul had written the first letters to the Corinthians, what we have as First Corinthians today. And you're probably very familiar with the fact that that letter is filled with a lot of corrections. Paul had to call the Corinthians to task because of division, because of different manifestations of carnality, because of sin in their midst, because they were fighting amongst each other, taking their brother for law, because of various things in their midst, and an incorrect way in conducting the Lord's supper.

Just any number of things he had to correct them. A very corrective epistle. And the tone of it is really rather severe.

If you were in the place of the Corinthians, how would you have responded to receiving this letter when he tells you, Look, you're doing wrong in this and that, and the other thing. And he goes right down the list and you find yourself just opened up wide to a lot of, well, it may not be right to call it fault finding, but he was finding fault with him. How were they going to receive that letter? Were they going to receive it in a humble spirit, acknowledging it as the word of God, and correctly false in their midst? Or were they going to rebel against the apostles? Paul sent this letter by the hand of Titus.

Titus took it through them, and Titus remained in coming back to Paul and telling Paul what was the reaction. So when Paul was in Troas, and there was an open door for him for the proclamation of the gospel, Paul says, Well, Titus certainly should have been back by this. Something must have gone wrong.

I don't know if he thought that or not, but anyway, he took leave over the next Troas, and he went into Macedonia to find Titus, and he found Titus as he read in chapter 7, and he found tremendous consolation in Titus, because it wasn't only the consolation he found in Titus and finding him, it was also the news that Titus brought concerning the Corinthians, that the Corinthians had humbled themselves and had accepted that letter as the word of God. But Paul says, Even though my leaving Troas was something that was not at all necessary, nothing was gained by it, except that I personally was relieved a little bit sooner, although I abandoned an open door, Christ always leads us in triumph. Now, can you and I say that in the midst of certain things that come into our lives when we think I made a mistake? When we think, as the young people say today, I blew it.

I did the wrong thing. I should have done a certain thing, but I was overly anxious and I did the other thing, which turned out to be the wrong thing. I wasn't walking in the will of God.

But can we turn around and say, But God always leads us in triumph. Now, this is the Christian optimistic attitude that I think we can take as we take Paul as a touchstone, and say, Well, if the apocryphal could say a thing like that under such circumstances, I can say a thing like that under similar circumstances as well. In other words, if we are pessimists, we are not taking the Christian attitude.

We're not measuring up to this touchstone that we have. Now, I know that some people, just by nature, are more inclined to be pessimists than other people, and some people, by nature, are more inclined to be optimists than other people. But you and I have the nature of Christ, and so we can be optimists in the midst of this world in which we live.

And may God then give us to manifest this holy optimism. Then, one other thing that will lead us on to our next point. In Galatians, chapter 1, verse 15, the apostle Paul says, For when it reached God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by His grace, here we are back to this original thought of grace, He called me by His grace to reveal His Son in me.

Now, I believe that that is how God has called everyone. Every person called by the grace of God and saved by that grace has been called to know that God's Son that will reveal Him. And certainly, as we read the language of the apostle Paul, we can say, yes, Jesus Christ was manifested, was revealed in Paul.

But it can't just happen to be revealed in Paul. To what extent are we being imitators? Are we following the apostle Paul? We have his writings, and we recognize the divine inspiration in these writings, and we would defend these writings against any others that would speak the same. Well, Paul made a mistake in this, and Paul wasn't right in that, and everything.

We would defend them. We defend them by our lips. Are we willing to defend them by our lives? Are these things manifested in our lives? And is Christ manifested in our lives? Well, then, this leads us to consider not only the apostle Paul as a touchstone, but to consider also the Lord Jesus Christ Himself as a touchstone.

This morning, we made reference to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 11, both record words of our Lord Jesus Christ, when He said, come unto me, all ye that labor in a heavy laden cry will give you rest. And He goes on to say, take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest when ye are full. Now, when the Lord Jesus Christ says, take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, to put this into other words, the Lord Jesus Christ is saying, look, get yoked up with me, and learn to walk as I walk.

As it says in 1 John, chapter 2, that we should walk even as we walk, and we should imitate the Lord Jesus Christ in all things. Taking this yoke upon us, and learning of Him, is the life of discipleship, but even beyond that, it is the life of a Christlike life. And as we walk this life of discipleship and a Christlike life, He says, we find rest unto our souls.

But what was this yoke? Now, I believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is saying, take my yoke upon you. It's not only the idea that we are to be yoked with Him as a yoke of our sin, He on one side and we on the other, going at the speed that He takes us at, learning of Him continually, but it is also the idea that as we are to be yoked with Him, He was yoked with His Father. And the Lord Jesus Christ, then, was yoked with His Father in His life here, doing all that His Father led Him to do, and saying all that His Father led Him to say.

So, we're considering the life of the Lord Jesus Christ in this life. We have, first of all, the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. He said, I'm speaking out of my mouth, but that which I hear, that I speak.

That which He hears from His mouth. Whether it was through the Old Testament scriptures, or the voice of the Holy Spirit conveying to Him directly the word of His Father, this was what the Lord Jesus Christ said. How often do we speak simply out of ourselves, our own opinion, not seeking to speak as representing the Lord Jesus Christ, not looking for divine guidance in what we say, but we simply speak that have come from the top of our heads.

But if we are to be truly yoked with the Lord Jesus Christ, we will seek to do that in our lives, what He did in His relationship with the Father. He spoke only that which the Father spoke in the beginning, so being related to the Lord Jesus Christ, we will only speak that which He spoke out of His mouth. And then another thing, you remember that the Lord Jesus Christ in John chapter 4 says that He went from Jerusalem, from Judea into Galilee, and He must meet those

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