

Relationships: The Faithfulness Factor
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- Let's talk music. Anybody have any favorite bands over the years?
- After a band becomes super successful, what generally happens to most bands? They break up!
- What kinds of things usually cause those break-ups?
- Even close friends and co-workers can get sideways in relationships and a friendship that once was growing and thriving like a healthy plant can one day begin to wither.
- Have you ever had that experience where a good relationship went sour?
- What if that friend was someone you had been involved with in ministry?
- Maybe someone you sang with in the choir; maybe a co worker in leading in the Children's ministry; maybe even someone in your Sunday School class.
- When the relationship began to go sour would you feel about showing up to serve with that friend?
- You might become discouraged and think about "throwing in the towel".
- Do you know where the expression "Throw in the towel" comes from? It's from boxing...when the fighter just can't go back into the ring...just can't take anymore... the manager throws a towel into the ring to signal the fighter gives up.

- Sometimes, even when we're doing our best in Christian work, broken relationships with other believers can make us feel like "throwing in the towel".
- As Christians, what should we do when we have a relationship that is broken? Attempt to reconcile. We'll talk more about that next week.
- For this week we're looking at how we can remain faithful in our service to God even when friends are unfaithful.
 - If anyone ever had a reason to feel like "throwing in the towel" in the face of a broken relationship it would have been the Apostle Paul dealing with the church at Corinth.
 - Though he had put his heart and soul into starting this church, not only did they get diverted into sinful practices, (as we studied in 1 Corinthians) now a group of false teachers had taken over and were trashing Paul and his ministry.
 - These false teachers were "Judaizers". You may recall last year when we studied Galatians, the whole purpose of that letter was to refute this kind of teaching.
 - They taught that not only was salvation through faith in Christ but that PLUS keeping the law of Moses.
 - They viciously attacked Paul's ministry; his character; his very calling.
 - In the first few verses of Chapter 3 Paul begins a defense of his ministry.
 - In this week's scripture Paul will show us that if God called you to His work, you don't leave your post until He gives you another assignment. And you sure don't

let a broken relationship chase you away! It's about staying FAITHFUL to God even in the face of bad relationships.

- So how do we deal with this? Let's look at the scripture.

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

1Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? 2You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. 3You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

4Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. 5Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 6He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

- In verse 1 Paul starts his own defense by posing a question: Do I need to bring a letter of recommendation like someone you've never met before?
- Even in that day a new teacher or pastor in a church would come with "letters of commendation" about their credentials.
- No doubt these false teachers had brought their own letters, perhaps forged, so the church would be impressed by their credentials.
- Verse 2: Paul says, I don't need a letter of recommendation in Corinth... YOU are my letter of recommendation!
- Verse 3: YOU are a letter from Christ that attests to the results of my ministry in Corinth!
- A letter written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God
- Look at verse 3: Where does he say this letter was NOT written? Tablets of stone.
- What is he referring to when he uses that term "tablets of stone"? 10 Commandments – The law of Moses..which these Judaizers were saying was necessary for salvation.
- Instead, where was THIS LETTER written? "tablets of human hearts"

Statement: If God has called you to His work, and you obey that calling, HIS results through YOUR work will speak for themselves!

- Notice in verse 4, Paul is concerned that his words will seem like arrogance or boasting so where does he shift the credit for his ministry? "Our competence comes from God."
- Verse 6: We're ministers the NEW covenant...not the OLD covenant
- Not "the letter" but "the Spirit"...not trying to keep the LAW but living by the Spirit of God inside us.

- Warren Wiersbe writes:

“The law is an external thing, and people need an INTERNAL power if their lives are to be transformed.” “The ministry of grace changes the heart. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God and writes it on the heart. The Corinthians were wicked sinners when Paul came to them, but his ministry of the gospel of God’s grace completely changed their lives.”

If you and I are being obedient to God and we're dealing with a broken relationship, we must remember, this is GOD’s work NOT our work. In the face of broken relationships, we don't throw in the towel. As Charles Stanley likes to say: We “Obey God and leave all the consequences to Him.

2 Corinthians 4:1-5

1Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. 3And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

- Verse 1: Paul is saying: This is not MY ministry...this is God’s ministry! I didn’t call myself...God called me.
- Therefore, what does Paul say we don’t do? We do not lose heart.
- What does it mean to “lose heart”? Become discouraged. To be a coward and surrender.

John MacArthur writes:

“Since God had called him to proclaim (the Gospel), Paul could not abandon his calling. Instead, he trusted God to strengthen him.”

In Acts 20:22-24 as he was saying farewell to the church as Ephesus Paul wrote:

22"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. 23I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. 24However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

- Verse 2: Paul says: I don’t use trickery or deceitful ways...I simply preach the truth of the Gospel. No doubt, these “false teachers” had been casting doubt on

Paul's teaching and he makes it plain. I just share the truth and count on God to "prick the consciences" of people.

- Look at verse 3. What does he say sometimes happens to the Gospel? Veiled. Hidden.
- Hidden to whom? To unbelievers.
- Verse 4: Who has caused unbelievers to be "blinded" to the Gospel?
- The god of this age – Satan.

- A "sidebar" regarding verses 3 & 4, Have you ever become discouraged about those who seem BLIND to the Gospel you are sharing with them? A.W. Tozer has a good reminder about that. He writes:

"The inward operation of the Holy Spirit is necessary to saving faith. The gospel is light but only the Spirit can give sight. When seeking to bring the lost to Christ we must pray continually that they may receive the gift of seeing. And we must pit our prayer against that dark spirit who blinds the hearts of men." (Emphasis mine)

- Verse 5: Paul says we're not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.
- These false teachers were accusing Paul of preaching for his own benefit to divert people from the fact that was what THEY were doing.
- Ever notice how a critic usually criticizes someone for the very thing THEY are guilty of?
- Paul gives the best defense anyone can have against criticism of your ministry.
- If you can say with integrity that you simply Present the Gospel, God will make it evident in your ministry.

2 Corinthians 4:15-18

15All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

16Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

- Verse 15: Paul says all this criticism and suffering he was dealing would ultimately be used for God's glory!
Though it doesn't feel good at the time, if we REALLY believe God's Word we know some things about how He uses FOR GOOD what others mean FOR EVIL:

Romans 8:28

28And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,[a] who [b] have been called according to his purpose.

Psalm 84:11

11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.

1 Peter 5:10

10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

- Verse 16: If we believe those verses we just read and so many others...here's that term again...we do NOT what? "lose heart"

John Piper writes:

To lose heart is to lose our courage or lose the will to go on. It means to be utterly spiritless and worn out, to throw in the towel. It is more than discouragement. It's discouragement to point of quitting the race before it is over.

God forbid that any of us should throw in the towel of our gospel ministries! We are those who do not lose heart! We do not throw in the towel of displaying the glory of God to the world! To throw in the towel of the gospel is to have believed in vain, to make shipwreck of our faith.

There are glorious promises that tell us that if we have indeed received this ministry that we will indeed not lose heart (John 10:27-30 for one). No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck us from his hand.

- How do we KEEP from losing heart? We change our focus.
- Verse 17 says this may feel like a BIG DEAL today...but it's just LIGHT and MOMENTARY when we compare it to what? ETERNITY.
- Paul says if we'll just keep our EYES on the PRIZE...the perspective of ETERNITY...what seems like THE END OF THE WORLD can't compare to THE BEGINNING OF ETERNITY
- If you want to put our trials like broken relationships in perspective, just compare them to ETERNITY with Christ.
- That's just what Paul is doing in verses 9 & 10.

2 Corinthians 5:9-10

9So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 10For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

- Verse 9: We make it our goal to please HIM.
- Anybody read Rick Warren's book "The Purpose Driven Life"? Do you know what the first four words of that book are?

"It's not about you.

The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose."

- Paul recognized, it's not about US it's about God.
- We tend to take it personally when people misunderstand us and reject the work we're doing for God. We tend to get defensive and discouraged.
- But it's not about us. It's kind of like 1 Samuel 8:7 as Israel was demanding a king God told Samuel "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me."

Our Lesson Commentary says it well:

"Paul understood the important question to be answered by ministers is not "What do people think of me?" but rather "What does GOD think of me?"

- Finally, in verse 10. Paul isn't looking at the past, or even the present difficult situations. Where is he looking? To the FUTURE. The Judgment Seat of Christ. The Bema seat.
- This is not the judgment for UNBELIEVERS...that's the Great White Throne Judgment.
- The Judgment Seat of Christ is when EVERY BELIEVER will appear before the Lord and our record will be reviewed.
- This has nothing to do with our salvation. Our SIN has already been forgiven thanks to Calvary. But our WORK as a believer will be JUDGED and REWARDED.
- I think we're going to see some BIG surprises at the Judgment Seat of Christ! I think God is going to surprise all of us as to who had the biggest impact for the kingdom. Some BIG shots won't seem so BIG and some LITTLE FOLKS won't seem so LITTLE when God reviews every deed we've done "in the body.
- Paul is saying: You think I'm gonna get DISTRACTED by some CRITICISM and being misunderstood?
- I'm working toward THE BIG REVIEW.
- I'm CRAMMING FOR THE FINAL.
- I'm staying the course, walking the line, and telling the truth.

- Misunderstandings and criticism won't be what matters when Jesus puts my life on THE BIG SCREEN.
- What will matter is what I've done for Jesus.

As Paul wrote to Timothy:

2 Timothy 1:6-7

6For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

Then Paul wrote his own epitaph:

2 Timothy 4:7-8

7I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

So what's the Takeaway?

In the face of criticism and unhealthy relationships...if we are doing what God has called us to do:

- We need to CONTINUE to serve Him FAITHFULLY...obey God and leave all the consequences to Him
- We WILL serve Him FAITHFULLY if we simply help others to understand the TRUTH of the Gospel.
- We will serve Him FAITHFULLY if we concentrate our attention not on our momentary trials but on things ETERNAL.
- Finally, we will serve God FAITHFULLY if we live anticipating the future judgment of Christians by Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ.