

## Heaven-Sent Messengers

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

How many of you recall that back in the late eighties the Tennis star Andre Agassi was part of an ad campaign for a camera called the Canon Rebel which featured the slogan, “Image is Everything.” During the commercial, which was shot in the Nevada desert, Agassi stepped out of a white Lamborghini, lowered his sunglasses, and uttered the words, “Image is everything.” Before the commercial, Agassi was already known as somewhat of a rebel on the court because of his attitude, the way he dressed and his long rock star hair style.

After the commercial, Agassi’s attitude and outfits only became more outrageous. He seemed to have embraced the persona that it’s all about image, which later he wrote in his autobiography that he regretted. Because he wasn’t winning championships early in his career, tennis fans and sportswriters began to question whether he was all show—all style, but no substance.

Based on his autobiography, one tennis reporter noted, “By ’89, Agassi, tired of being asked when he would win a major, found himself on the verge of burnout.” Apparently, living to cultivate an image that pleases the crowd is exhausting and leaves you empty in the end.

Later, Agassi teamed up with a strength coach who helped him focus on developing his tennis game. “The two, through their pioneering conditioning work, would spend the latter part of Agassi’s career turning the rebel into a champion, and making the world forget all about his ‘image.’” Steve Tanor

This fixation with projecting an image that gains social acceptance has only increased in our social media age. While social media promises to connect us to one another, “one of the unintended effects,” writes Timothy Gombis, “is to generate a situation in which we each cultivate our brand, displaying our lives for public consumption in hopes of earning social approval in the forms of “likes,” “follows” and

“mentions.” Social media shapes us so that we all live as if image is everything.”

Let me clarify that we should care about the image that we project. The problem arises when our image is not who we really are or is one that is being shaped by societal pressures and unwittingly seeks first the approval of our culture.

As we will see, the apostle Paul cared about the kind of gospel minister the Corinthians were seeing in him. Because his character was being maligned by his opponents so that they might gain power and influence in the church, he was forced to have to present his credentials to defeat and expose them.

But unlike his opponents, his credentials were not shaped by the culture of Corinth. Rather the credentials that validated his ministry, were shaped by the cross which involved his participation in the sufferings of Christ and unleashed resurrection power.

**Main idea:** Heaven-sent messengers will gladly spend and be spent to build up others in the faith.

To unfold this theme, we are going to consider the cross shaped credentials that Paul presented to demonstrate the signs of a true apostle—a heaven-sent messenger for Christ.

### **1. Bear the burdens of others patiently**

Notice first that the signs of a true apostle—a heaven-sent messenger is that they bear the burdens of others patiently. Having boasted about his credentials, in which he emphasized his weaknesses, Paul continues in verse eleven:

*“I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.” 2 Corinthians 12:11*

As Paul continues to present proof for the authenticity of his gospel ministry, he reiterates that he's been acting as a fool. In other words, it was out of character for Paul to promote himself as his opponents were accustomed to doing. But as he explains in verse eleven, he was forced to.

The reason he felt forced to present his credentials was twofold. First, his opponents were tearing him down. And secondly, the Corinthians, who he led to Christ, didn't speak up on his behalf.

How many of you know, a lot of the division that plagues churches could be avoided if Christians would refuse to participate in gossip and lovingly correct those who do. As Jim Cymbala exhorts new members to do, "If ever we hear anyone speaking negatively of someone who is not present, we should stop that person in mid-sentence and say, 'Excuse me – who hurt you? Who ignored you? Who slighted you? Was it (the pastor)? Let's go to his office right now . . . so God can restore peace to this body. But we will not let you talk critically about people who are not present to defend themselves.'"

In Paul's case, the Corinthian believers should have corrected his detractors, and also commended Paul to them. They had not only witnessed firsthand the kind of minister he was, but they were also beneficiaries of his cross shaped service for Christ.

As he also explained in 2 Corinthians 3:2, they themselves were his letters of recommendation. Paul's opponents, who he referred to as super-apostles, were waving their letters of recommendation to claim superiority. But Paul didn't need those letters; the changed lives in the church of Corinth, were his living letters that validated his ministry.

Nevertheless, the Corinthians were taken by the smooth-talking super-apostles who cultivated an image that looked impressive to the society of Corinth. Among other things, they had outward appeal, oratory flare, and material wealth that in the culture of Corinth was a sign of success.

According to those credentials, Paul was inferior. But according to the credentials that are the signs of a true apostle, Paul explained, *“For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing”* (v.11b).

When Paul says that he was not inferior to these super-apostles, he’s not speaking with a tone of superiority or boasting in himself. After stating that he was not inferior to the super apostles, he adds, *“even though I am nothing.”* In other words, the reason he’s not inferior wasn’t due to his own strength, but the grace of God at work in Him.

Now after carefully explaining that he was not inferior, and yet on his own he was nothing, Paul goes on to remind the Corinthians of the signs of a true apostle. He writes, *“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. <sup>13</sup> For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!”* 2 Corinthians 12:12-13

What are the signs of a true apostle? Before answering that question, it’s important to note what the word apostle means. In a generic sense, the Greek word translated apostle in the New Testament simply means one who is sent out as a messenger.

Moreover, the word is used most often to refer to the 12 apostles who were sent by Jesus and given unique authority to establish the church with Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone (Ephesians 2:20). Among other things, the qualifications for being one of the twelve apostles was to have witnessed the resurrection of Christ and to have been personally called by Him.

Besides the twelve, the word apostle was also used in a more basic sense to refer to others, like Barnabas and Titus who were sent out by the church as messengers for Christ (2 Corinthians 8:23).

Let me add that although the 12 apostles, along with Paul, had unique authority in laying the foundation of the church, in the general sense of

the word, all believers are sent messengers and representatives for Christ on earth.

In light of this, when Paul speaks of the signs of a true apostle, he includes signs and wonders, which refers to miracles.

According to Hebrews 2:4, the signs and wonders performed by the apostles served as a kind of “letter of commendation” to the foundational ministry of the apostles. But they were not the primary sign that Paul was heaven-sent. As I noted earlier, the changed lives of Corinthians were his letters of recommendation and proof that Paul was a heaven-sent messenger for Christ.

Notice that when speaking of the signs or proof of his apostolic authority, Paul says to the Corinthians, “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with *utmost patience*.”

If you recall, when speaking of his credentials in 2 Corinthians 11 and 12, Paul spoke of the various hardships and afflictions he endured while taking the message of the gospel to unreached places, including Corinth.

So, it was not just the miracles themselves, but more significantly the sufferings that he endured by the grace and love of Christ that were the evidence that he was heaven-sent. The scars on his body were the proof.

It’s important to note also that beyond the signs and wonders and the sufferings he endured, Paul also pointed to the related burdens that he bore. He continues in verse 13: “*For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!*” <sup>14</sup> *Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.*” 2 Corinthians 12:13-14

As we learned in chapter eleven, because of the immaturity of the Corinthian believers and to avoid being associated with the greedy

super-apostle, Paul did not receive financial support from the Corinthians. Instead, he received support from other more spiritually minded churches so that he could continue to minister to them free of charge.

But it appears that the super-apostles found a way of using the truth that he did not burden them, against him. He continues in verse 16: *“But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. <sup>17</sup> Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? <sup>18</sup> I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?”* 2 Corinthians 12:16-18

Notice that some in the church of Corinth were accusing Paul, who did not require support from them, of trying to pull one over on them. Exactly what they were accusing him of we don't know for sure. Perhaps they were implying that he didn't receive support because he knew he wasn't worthy of it, while also accusing him of lining his pockets with the donations that his ministry team collected from other churches for the relief efforts in Jerusalem.

But the only thing that Paul was guilty of, which he asked forgiveness for, was that he did not burden them. And he did not burden them, because like a father would do for his children, Paul gladly sacrificed himself to minister to their spiritual needs.

Paul's cross shaped heart is also powerfully seen verse 14 where he explained that for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time he's getting ready to take the difficult journey to Corinth. And that he was doing so not because he was interested in what they could give him, but because he was interested in them. He cared about them. He wanted to see them progressing in the faith and love of Jesus.

Beloved, looking out for the interests of others and not just our own, being concerned for the person and not just for what the person can do for you, is at the heart of what a heaven-sent messenger of Christ is all about and what should mark our lives as Christians.

Furthermore, because of the love of Christ in their hearts, in addition to not wanting to be a burden, heaven-sent messengers bear the burdens of others. As Paul explained in verse 15: *“I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”* 2 Corinthians 12:15

When Paul asked, *If I love you more, am I to be loved less*, and when he also asked verse 13 to be forgiven, he doesn't really think he did something wrong, and he's not demanding to be loved back. He's asking these questions with a broken heart, like a father would a wayward child.

Beloved, should not those of us who know the redeeming love of Christ and who have been loved by others who know the love of Christ, show the same love to them and others for the sake of Christ?

I was watching a movie the other day about a renowned chef who was going to work for a new restaurant. While looking for new assistants to work with him, he meets a young chef who greatly admired him. While interviewing him, the young chef said, “You've always been my hero. I've studied your menus and recipes.” The renowned chef replied, “A hero or a god?” The young chef responded, “I don't know the difference.” The renowned chef explained, “Would you work for me for nothing? Confused, the young chef replied, “For nothing?” “For food, for meals,” explained the renowned chef. “Yeah absolutely, if I'm learning.” Then the renowned chef asked, “Would you pay to work for me?” Hesitantly, the young chef said he would.

Should our love and devotion to Jesus be any less? Can I tell you, any so-called ordained minister of the gospel or seminary graduate who has not served in the ministry free of charge, who is not willing to sacrifice, who hasn't paid to preach or to minister to others is not called of God. If you know the love of Christ, you will spend and be spent in the service of the Lord.

## **2. Build up others in faith lovingly**

With this in mind, notice also that in addition to bearing the burdens of others patiently, heaven-sent messengers build up others in faith lovingly. Having explained to the Corinthians how he had sacrificially demonstrated his love to them, he continues in verse 19: *“Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved”*

Although Paul in one sense was defending himself by presenting his credentials, he was not being defensive. Paul wasn't someone who was resistant to being held accountable, nor was he anxiously trying to justify his actions.

Rather, as he goes on to explain, he was speaking with complete and total honesty to the Corinthians in God's presence as someone who was secure in Christ (v.19b). He wasn't trying to protect his image for selfish gain. What God saw in him is what mattered most to Paul and he knew God saw everything.

Moreover, the reason he gave a defense for the integrity of his ministry was for the sake of the Corinthians. He wasn't doing damage control. He wasn't trying to protect his image to protect his salary or his interests. Rather, he was seeking to protect the Corinthians from the wolves in sheep's clothing.

Furthermore, as he explains at the end of verse 19, he didn't present his credentials to build himself up, but to build up the Corinthians whom he loved so much.

Beloved, what image do you care about the most, the one man can see or the one God's sees? When you care more about the image that you're cultivating before man than the cultivation of the image of Christ before God, you may gain some benefits from man, but you will forfeit the blessings of God.

On the other hand, when you care more about cultivating the image of Christ before the presence of God, and are growing in His love, you will be secure in your identity in Christ. So secure that it will be your



joy to bear the burdens of others and build them up in Christ for their joy and for the glory of Christ.

### **3. Break over the sins of others deeply**

Lastly, true apostles and all heaven-sent, Spirit-filled messengers break over the sins of others deeply. As Paul anticipates his third visit to the church of Corinth who he deeply cared about, sacrificed so much for, and wherein he saw the grace of God at work, he continues: *“For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. <sup>21</sup> I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.”* 2 Corinthians 12:20-21

There is a kind of fear and worry that is unproductive and even destructive. Moreover, there can be an excessive sorrow that is void of hope that can be detrimental to our lives and ministries. But there is a legitimate fear and sorrow, rooted in the love of God, that we should all experience as devoted followers of Christ.

Because Paul loved the Corinthians and was invested in seeing them progressing in their love for Christ, he feared that they would stray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. His fear was not baseless, or coming from his own imagination.

He feared because he heard the reports of their struggles and was aware of the deceptive influence the wolves were having over them. He wasn't fearful of speaking the truth to the Corinthians, if indeed he found them in sin on his third visit.

However, having to rebuke them was not something he took joy in. In fact, earlier in his letter he explained that he sent other ministers before him with letters hoping that the letters would correct them so he wouldn't have to correct them in person. 2 Corinthians 2:1-4

Notice also that in verse 21 he explains that he feared that God would humble him before them during his visit and that he would mourn over many who had not repented of their sins.

When Paul says he fears being humbled by God before the Corinthians, he's not implying that he had some kind of pride issue that God needed to check. Rather he's speaking of the vicarious humiliation that he would feel for the Corinthians, along with a brokenness, if he should find them in an unrepentant sinful state.

Again, because Paul cultivated a deep awareness of the presence of God and was secure in the love of Christ, he reflected the image of Christ, he took on the heart of Christ. And because he had the heart of Christ, he was sensitive to the gravity of sin and broken for those in sin.

The Corinthian believers, on the other hand, because they had been straying from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ, were easily susceptible to falling into sins that severed their relationship with others, like gossip, jealousy and anger, and also personal sins of the flesh, like *impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality* which they struggled with in the past.

How many of you know, like the church of Corinth and perhaps even more so, we live in a sexualized society where impurity, sexual immorality and sensuality is pervasive, it's all around us. Furthermore, we are living in a time of great hostility and division due to politics and other social ills that have also crept into the church.

How are we supposed to influence the world for Christ if we look like the world, if our churches are filled with angry people given to quarreling, gossip, division and slander? How can we represent the kingdom of Christ if there's impurity in our lives, if we are engaging in sex outside of marriage, if the sensuality and immodesty of our culture is shaping how we dress, namely to accentuate or reveal the sensual parts of our bodies?

How do we keep from conforming to this perverse society so that we shine as lights in the darkness—so that we are the peacemakers not the gossipers, so that we are agents of reconciliations not division, so that we are broken over the sins of others in our world not indifferent, so that with great sacrifice we bear the burdens of others and build them up in the Lord?

Like Paul, we must live in the presence of God and find our ultimate security in the love of Jesus. We live in the presence of God by cultivating a deeper awareness of God through hiding God's word in our hearts and praying without ceasing.

We must come to a place where we care more about reflecting the image of Christ before God than cultivating an image that may engender acceptance before man, but forfeits God's power.

## **Conclusion**

Knowing how much we are loved by God in Christ, who gave His all on the cross for our sin, who became poor, so that we might become rich, should we not show Him how much we love Him by loving others the way He loves us?

O may we live to the praise of His grace by gladly being spent for the cause of Christ, driven by the confidence that this is how we will enjoy the resurrection power of God.