

08/09/26

The Heart of a True Minister

Cornerstone Intro...

Read: 2 Corinthians 12:11–18

Introduction

I want you to imagine someone you love and care for deeply. Maybe it's your spouse, your child, your parent, another family member, or a close friend. Now imagine watching that person come under the influence of someone who is leading them astray.

They start questioning what they once knew to be true and begin making choices that could have severe and lasting consequences. Imagine the sorrow, concern, and urgency you would feel as you watched someone you love being led astray.

That helps us understand something of Paul's heart throughout this letter. Paul loved the Corinthians immensely. He had brought the gospel to them, became their spiritual father, he had spent eighteen months with them, faithfully teaching the Word of God, shepherding their souls, and sharing his life with them.

But after his departure, false apostles had entered the church and were turning the Corinthians against him. They led the church to question Paul's authority as an apostle, doubt his motives, discredit his ministry, and think less of him because of his weakness and suffering.

Paul's greatest concern was not his reputation being damaged. This was not a proud man who wanted people to think highly of him. Paul understood that the Corinthians' rejection of his apostolic ministry was a rejection of the true gospel he had proclaimed.

That is why Paul was compelled to defend himself. He did not defend himself for his own glory, but for the glory of Christ, the truth of the gospel, and the spiritual good of the Corinthian believers.

In the verses before us this morning we see the character of a true minister. We see the heart that drives all faithful ministry.

Main Point: In 2 Corinthians 12:11–18, we see four heart qualities of a true minister so that we would cultivate these same qualities as we minister to others.

Outline:

I. A Heart of Humility in Reluctant Defense (11)

II. A Heart of Perseverance Amid Persecution (12)

III. A Heart of Sacrificial Love for Others (13–15)

IV. A Heart of Transparent Integrity in Ministry (16–18)

My prayer is that this passage to refine our hearts to minister with humility, perseverance, sacrificial love, and integrity for the glory of Christ and the good of others.

I. A Heart of Humility in Reluctant Defense (11)

Paul has now reached the end of what has been called his “fool’s speech.” Throughout this section, he has done something he did not want to do, which was boast about himself. Paul reluctantly defended his apostolic ministry because the Corinthians had failed to defend him, and more importantly, what God had done through him.

Look at verse 11, **“I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody.”**

Paul said he played the fool. He boasted about himself and his experiences, and it left him feeling **“foolish.”** Yet he tells the Corinthians, **“You yourselves compelled me.”**

As we have seen, it appears these false apostles boasted about their lineage, status, accomplishments, strength, and claims of spiritual visions in order to discredit Paul (2 Corinthians 11:4–5, 13, 18–22; 12:1).

This forced Paul to recount his own ministry credentials (2 Corinthians 11:22), sufferings (2 Corinthians 11:23–33), weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:5, 9–10), and revelation from the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:1–4). This was all covered in the last two sermons by Steven and John Marc.

The Corinthians should never have placed Paul in this position. That is why he wrote, **“Actually I should have been commended by you.”** The Corinthians knew who Paul was.

He had spent eighteen months teaching them God’s Word and shepherding them as their spiritual father in the faith (Acts 18:1–11; 1 Corinthians 4:14–15). Their transformed lives were themselves his **“letter of commendation”** (2 Corinthians 3:2).

Yet when the false apostles discredited him, they remained silent. Drawing on this, Charles Hodge, said that when believers have the opportunity to defend a righteous person against slander but remain silent, they share in the guilt of those who are tearing them down.

The Corinthians allowed themselves to be led astray by the corrupt influence of these false apostles. Because they failed to commend Paul, Paul was compelled to commend himself.

Paul then gives us an interesting paradox, **“for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody.”** The original language literally says, “for in nothing I was inferior... even though I am nothing.”

On the one hand, Paul was not inferior to those whom he sarcastically calls the **“most eminent apostles”** or “super-apostles.” His apostolic authority, ministry, and gospel were true.

On the other hand, Paul said, **“I am nothing.”** Paul did not regard himself as inherently important, impressive, or worthy of praise. He knew that he was an earthen vessel; a clay pot through whom God had chosen to display the surpassing greatness of His power (2 Corinthians 4:7).

This is humility in true form. True humility was Paul acknowledging that everything he was and everything accomplished through his ministry was ultimately the result of God’s grace.

This was consistent with the way Paul viewed himself throughout his ministry, in light of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 15:8–10 “and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.”

Paul did not deny that he worked hard. He said that he had labored more than all of them. Yet even as he acknowledged effort, he refused to take ultimate credit for it. He said, **“Yet not I, but the grace of God with me.”**

This was Paul’s consistent view of himself. In **Ephesians 3:8**, Paul called himself **“the very least of all saints,”** emphasizing that the privilege of preaching Christ was entirely a gift of grace. In **1 Timothy 1:12–16**, he remembered that he had formerly been a blasphemer, persecutor, and violent aggressor.

He understood that his ministry existed only because Christ had shown him abundant mercy, forgiven him, strengthened him, and placed him into service. Therefore, he had no grounds for self-glory. Everything good in him and through him was a testimony to the grace of Christ.

The same is true for every believer. The more we understand the gospel, the more we will understand we have no cause to boast in ourselves. We need to recognize that our salvation, spiritual gifts, opportunities for service, growth in holiness, and every measure of usefulness are gifts of God's grace.

When a musician produces beautiful music through the strings of an instrument, no one praises the strings. They praise the musician whose skillful hand caused the strings to make that sound.

In the same way, whatever is good, beautiful, or spiritually fruitful in the life of a Christian should ultimately direct praise not to the servant, but to Christ, whose gracious hand is at work through that servant.

How, then, should we apply Paul's example? There are occasions when Christians may rightly defend themselves, particularly when the truth of the gospel, the integrity of ministry, or the spiritual good of others is at stake.

Yet our defense must be marked by humility. We must ask whether we are speaking because the truth is being threatened or merely because our pride is hurt? There is no place for pride in the Christian life.

A true minister may need to defend himself, but he does so reluctantly and humbly for the glory of Christ and the good of others. And in order to do this well, it will require perseverance, and that leads us to our next point...

II. A Heart of Perseverance Amid Persecution (12)

The Corinthians had personally witnessed the marks of Paul's genuine apostleship. Yet the emphasis of this verse is not only on the signs performed, but the perseverance with which Paul ministered them.

Look at verse 12, **"The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles."**

What were **"the signs of a true apostle"**? These were the distinguishing works that marked a man as a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul further describes them as **"signs and wonders and miracles."** These three words are used to show us the nature of these works were.

They were **"signs"** because they pointed to the authority of God and the truthfulness of the apostle's message. They were **"wonders"** because they produced this sense of amazement and awe. And they were **"miracles,"** (mighty works) because they displayed the power of God.

These signs were not given randomly or arbitrarily. They had a distinct purpose. God used them to confirm the apostles as Christ's authorized representatives and to testify to the truth of the gospel they proclaimed (Romans 15:18–19; Hebrews 2:3–4).

In **Acts 14:8–10**, Paul healed a man at Lystra who had been lame from birth and had never walked. In **Acts 19:11–12**, while Paul was ministering in Ephesus, God performed extraordinary miracles through him, even using handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him to heal the sick and drive out evil spirits. In **Acts 20:7–12**, God restored Eutychus to life through Paul after he had fallen from a third-story window.

Although Acts does not record the specific miracles Paul performed in Corinth, Paul says they were performed **“among”** the Corinthians. They had witnessed the evidence themselves.

The apostolic office was unique and foundational. The apostles were commissioned by the risen Christ, bore authoritative witness to His resurrection, and were used to establish the church and deliver God's inspired Word, our New Testament.

Pastors and missionaries today do not possess the authority or miraculous credentials of the foundational apostles. All claims of miracles must be tested by the completed and sufficient Word of God, particularly because Scripture warns that false signs can deceive people (2 Thessalonians 2:8–9).

But although the apostolic signs were important, Paul places particular emphasis on the manner in which they were performed: **“with all perseverance.”**

The word translated **“perseverance”** describes steadfast endurance. In this context, it is the determination to remain under hardship without abandoning one's calling or surrendering one's faithfulness.

Paul continued ministering faithfully even when that ministry resulted in rejection, suffering, and persecution. In fact, when he arrived at Corinth for the first time, some of the Jews opposed him and resisted the message, so he turned his attention to ministering to the Gentiles.

The hostility was serious enough that Paul experienced fear. The Lord appeared to him in a vision during the night and said:

Acts 18:9–10 “And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid *any longer*, but go on speaking and do not be silent; ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.’”

Acts 18:11 says, “**And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.**”

Paul was afraid, but he kept speaking. He had people oppose him, but he continued teaching the truth. He was slandered and threatened, but he did not alter the gospel in order to avoid opposition.

His perseverance demonstrated that he was not ministering for comfort, approval, or personal gain. He was ministering because Christ had commissioned him. The miraculous signs were remarkable, but the perseverance with which Paul ministered was a powerful testimony of the genuineness of his calling. He remained faithful even when faithfulness cost him greatly.

Perseverance in the face of opposition is still a distinguishing mark of faithful ministry. A true minister proclaims the Word in season and out of season and willingly endures hardship and persecution (2 Timothy 4:2, 5).

We do not change or adjust the message to preserve our comfort or gain the approval of others. As Paul stated at the end of chapter 10, our concern is not to commend ourselves before men, but to live and minister for the Lord’s approval (2 Corinthians 10:18).

Now we have to be careful guard against pride, quarrelsomeness, and a contentious spirit. We don’t add offense to the gospel. Instead, we must speak the truth with love, gentleness, and patience, without ever compromising God’s truth.

The supreme example of this type of perseverance is Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:21–23 “**For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,** ²² **who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth;** ²³ **and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously;**

Jesus endured rejection, false accusation, mockery, and ultimately the cross without compromise. He entrusted Himself to God and remained obedient to the end.

A mark of a true minister is not what they proclaim when circumstances are favorable, but whether they remain faithful when speaking the truth has a cost.

False ministers edit the message when the cost becomes too great. True ministers persevere because they belong to Christ, depend upon His strength, and understand that the church and the ministry all belong to Him.

A heart of true ministry is therefore a heart of perseverance. A heart resolved to proclaim the Word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ faithfully, whatever the cost. And another reason true ministers are willing to pay that cost is because of their sacrificial love for others...

III. A Heart of Sacrificial Love for Others (13–15)

Here, Paul opens his heart further. His refusal of financial support was not evidence that he loved the Corinthians less, but that he would fully give himself for their spiritual good.

Look at verse 13 **“For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!”**

Paul asks how the Corinthians had been treated worse than other churches. He had given them the same instruction, the same love, the same care. The only difference was that Paul had not required financial support.

Paul received assistance from other churches but refused to be a financial burden to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:8–9). He had the right to receive support (1 Corinthians 9:3–14) but voluntarily surrendered it for their benefit.

His opponents twisted this sacrifice into evidence against him, perhaps arguing that his refusal proved he was not a legitimate apostle or that he valued other churches more highly. Paul preached without charge so that his motives would remain clear and the gospel would not be hindered.

Paul therefore says, **“Forgive me this wrong!”** While some understand this as irony exposing the absurdity of their accusation, it may also reflect Paul’s genuine desire for reconciliation. Recognizing that the Corinthians were offended, Paul was willing to seek their forgiveness so that the relationship might be fully restored.

Paul then explains the heart behind his decision. Look at verses 14–15, **“Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. 15 I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”**

Paul was preparing to visit Corinth again, and he would again not burden them. He did not refuse support to hurt them. But because, he said, **“I do not seek what is yours, but you.”**

Paul did not want their property, money, possessions, or any other material thing from them. He was not using them for any gain for himself. He wanted them. Not for himself, but for Christ. He desired their holiness and sincere love and devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2–3).

This exposes a fundamental difference between true and false ministry. False ministers seek what people possess. True ministers seek the spiritual good of the people themselves. False ministers ask, “What can these people give me?” True ministers ask, “How can I be used for the benefit of their souls?”

Paul illustrates his concern through the relationship between parents and children. He had become their spiritual father through the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:15). A faithful parent does not view his children as a source of gain.

Parents work, sacrifice, and provide for their children. Likewise, Paul didn’t want anything from the Corinthians, except that their hearts would belong fully to Christ.

Paul is not denying a minister’s right to support or a child’s duty to care for aging parents (1 Timothy 5:4, 8, 17–18). He is revealing his heart. He is showing his fatherly, pastoral, shepherding love that led him to enter their lives, not to profit from them, but to give himself for their good.

That leads to one of the most moving declarations in the passage: **“I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls.”**

To **“spend”** is to use up one’s resources. Paul was willing to give his money, time, energy, strength, and comfort for their spiritual good. But he goes further, saying he was willing to **“be expended.”** He would give not merely what he possessed but himself. He was willing to pour out his life for their souls.

Notice that he would do this **“most gladly.”** Paul was not inwardly resenting the sacrifice or keeping a record so that he could later demand repayment. He joyfully gave because he loved them and desired their highest good. True ministry is characterized by a willingness to give rather than a demand to receive.

Paul closes with a painful question: **“If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”** His love was misunderstood and poorly returned, yet he continued seeking their good.

As we consider this incredible display of sacrificial love, we have to understand how someone can even love another person this way. Alan Redpath wrote, **“Paul is only a faint shadow of the Lord Jesus; and if these qualities are found in his life, it is only because they were found completely in the life of Jesus Christ our Lord.”**

Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for sinners on the cross is the supreme display of love. And that love becomes even more remarkable when we understand who we are.

God is our Creator. He is holy, righteous, and worthy of all our worship, gratitude, and obedience. Yet every one of us has sinned against Him. We have dishonored our parents. We have harbored sinful anger and hatred in our hearts.

We have committed adultery in our hearts through lust. We have taken what does not belong to us. We have lied and borne false witness. We have coveted what God has given to others.

And the tenth commandment makes clear that God's law reaches beyond our outward actions to the desires of our hearts. We have not loved God or our neighbor as He commands. We are guilty before Him.

And this is what makes the love of God so incredible. **Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”**

We were not deserving of His love. We were sinners and enemies, yet God sent His Son. Jesus Christ lived the perfectly righteous life we have failed to live and willingly gave Himself on the cross, bearing the judgment our sins deserved.

And He proved who He was and what He accomplished by rising from the dead on the third day. Now everyone who turns from sin and trusts in Him will be forgiven, reconciled to God, and receive eternal life.

If you are outside of Christ, do not remain in your sin. Repent. Turn from your rebellion and come to Jesus Christ and believe upon Him. Trust in Him alone as Lord and Savior, and receive the mercy that God freely offers to sinners through His Son.

And when you have received that love, it changes the way you love others. **1 John 4:10–11** says, **“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son”** as the sacrifice for our sins. John then concludes, **“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”**

That is how Paul could spend and be expended for the Corinthians. He had first been loved by Christ. And that same love should shape every true minister and every believer. We do not seek what people can give us. We seek their spiritual good for Christ. We want this heart and it will require

IV. A Heart of Transparent Integrity in Ministry (16–18)

The false apostles took this situation even further. They turned his refusal of financial support into an accusation. They claimed that he had used his associates and the collection for Jerusalem to enrich himself indirectly.

Look at verse **16**, “**But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself.**” He then addresses the accusation being made against him: “**Nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.**”

He is again speaking with this jarring irony. His opponents were effectively saying, “Paul did not take your money directly because he was too clever for that. He secretly obtained it through the men he sent to you.”

The context for this was likely the collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem. Paul had encouraged the Corinthians to complete their promised gift, and Titus had been involved in preparing that gift (2 Corinthians 8:6, 16–24; 9:3–5). His opponents may have alleged that the offering was a scheme to obtain their money.

Paul answers by appealing to facts the Corinthians could verify. Look at verse **17**, “**Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I?**”

The expression “**taken advantage**” means to exploit, defraud, or profit dishonestly from another person. Paul asks whether any representative he sent had manipulated them for personal gain. He is asking if this accusation is at all consistent with the visible character of those whom he sent.

Paul then names **Titus**. The Corinthians knew him personally and could evaluate his conduct. Neither Titus nor the unnamed **brother** who accompanied him had exploited them, misused the offering, or secretly funneled money to Paul. Their conduct confirmed Paul’s integrity.

Paul then concludes at the end of verse **18**, “**Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?**”

Paul and Titus served in the same manner. They had the same motives, and they followed the same pattern of integrity because both were committed to serving Christ faithfully.

This is especially important because the accusation involved money. Financial matters can expose greed, create suspicion, and bring reproach upon the gospel. Therefore Paul did more than insist that his motives were pure. He arranged the collection in a manner that was open, transparent, and had accountability.

Earlier, Paul explained that trusted brothers had been appointed to travel with the gift. He was **“taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift,”** because he aimed at what was **honorable “not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men”** (2 Corinthians 8:20–21).

Faithful servants take reasonable steps to make their conduct transparent before people. Outward sincerity is not an excuse for someone to be engaged in conduct that is not above reproach. Every faithful minister will always welcome and strive for a high level of accountability.

This remains essential in ministry today. Churches and ministry leaders must handle money, authority, and every entrusted responsibility with visible honesty through clear procedures, trustworthy people, accurate records, and intentional oversight.

Transparency does not guarantee that no one will make a false accusation. Paul followed wise practices, yet he was still slandered. But transparent conduct allows a minister to answer accusations by pointing to a consistent pattern of life others have witnessed.

A true minister has nothing to conceal. His message, motives, methods, and handling of resources should all agree. He will pursue practices that make integrity visible.

As we come to the end of this passage, notice that Paul never asks the Corinthians to admire him. His desire is that they would recognize what genuine, Christlike ministry looks like so they would reject the influence of false teachers and imitate faithful servants of Christ.

So, we need to ask ourselves, what kind of servants are we becoming? Are you cultivating humility that gives all the glory to God? Are you persevering when obedience to Christ has a cost? Are you loving people enough to spend and be expended for their souls? Are you living with an integrity of life that reinforces the message we proclaim?

These qualities that should mark every mature Christian. Whether you are leading your family, discipling a younger believer, serving in children's ministry, greeting people on Sunday morning, counseling a friend, or sharing the gospel with a neighbor, God calls each of us to minister with this same heart.

So as God's people, let us more fully upon Christ and His grace. As we abide in Him, His character is increasingly formed in us, and He enables us to serve others with the very heart we have seen in Paul.

Associate Pastor Adrian Garcia, Cornerstone Community Church

And pray that Cornerstone be known as a church filled with men and women who gladly spend and are expended for the spiritual good of others because Christ first loved us and gave Himself for us.

Let's pray.

Benediction: **2 Thessalonians 3:5 (NASB95)**

⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.