

From The Pulpit Of



IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH

Faithful Ministry

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2 Corinthians 1:15-24

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Text

¹⁵ Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. ¹⁶ I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. ¹⁷ Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? ¹⁸ As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹ And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

²³ But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

Introduction

There are a lot of religious hucksters out there, even within Christianity. Was the Apostle Paul one of them, a charlatan, a scammer, deceiving, manipulating, slimy, just in it for himself? Looking closely at the historical records, it’s hard to draw that conclusion. 2 Corinthians is one of the most revealing letters of his where you can really see his heart as you observe him dealing with accusations. We saw him start to address those last week in vv. 12-14. He continues to explain himself in today’s text – 2 Corinthians 1:15-24. In doing so I think he gives us a good example of what faithful Christian ministry is. It’s just this: **faithful Christian ministry is consistent, Christ-exalting, and not controlling.**

Let’s pray...

Consistent

I hope you’ve had glimpses of **faithful Christian ministry** in your life – a genuine Christian who genuinely cared for you. If not, I’m sorry. I hope you can at least find the Apostle Paul to be trustworthy. But I also am hoping that this look at his writings does even more: that it encourages *you* to be a faithful Christian minister yourself.

The first aspect of **faithful Christian ministry** that we see here is that it is **consistent**. By that I mean that one’s words and actions match up. There should not be a pattern of saying one thing, but doing another. There should be integrity. Those who are

representing Jesus should be able to be trusted to do what they say they will do. To keep their word, to be **consistent**.

Have you ever met someone whose words and behavior were not **consistent**? Contractors, mortgage brokers, someone trying to get you to do business with them who will promise the moon but not follow through? We've all met people who will say what you want to hear to talk you into buying their product? What if the product is Jesus? Sometimes a lack of **consistency** is annoying, like the friend who says he'll be there at 8:00, but you just know he won't show up until like 8:30. But sometimes it's devastating, like the spouse who says he or she will forsake all others until death but you found out is cheating or the parent who says he or she will always love you but has abandoned you. When someone is talking to you about the Lord, but turns out to be telling lies, that is extremely disorienting. If your life is full of inconsistencies, how can I trust what you're saying about God? It's a great tragedy.

Some people were trying to say that this is what Paul was like. Essentially, Paul had expressed a certain plan for visiting them, but things happened and he felt he had to change his itinerary.¹ That's what is behind his words in vv. 15-16 where he says, "Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace." That could mean a double blessing of two visits from him. Or it could mean "a double opportunity to be blessed by expressing generosity"² – more chances to contribute to the collection. It doesn't mean some kind of second blessing subsequent to salvation that ushers you into a higher life. It's basically a way of talking about two trips. He says, "I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea." But things got complicated. He wouldn't be coming twice. Does that mean Paul is one of those people who doesn't keep his word?

He says, "Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time?" Basically, he's denying being one of those kinds of people who talks out of both sides of his mouth and tells people what they want to hear without the intention of keeping his word. He's not fickle and flaky. He had good reasons for changing plans (as we'll see in a bit). He wasn't a sweet-talker. Verse 18 – "As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No." Paul's careful to be **consistent**. His took his words seriously and sought to make good on them. If he had to adapt his travel plans, he had good reason, not just that he didn't feel like it or he didn't really mean it. Paul had shown himself to be dependable, trustworthy, **consistent**.

How about you? Are you careful to be true to your word? Do you follow through? Have you gotten into a habit of making promises you can't or don't have an intention of keeping? If you say you're going to do something, can people expect that you'll do it, or if you don't then that you had a very good reason? **Faithful Christian ministry is consistent**. I think you'll find as you get to know Paul that he was **consistent** like this. And I think you'll find that there are still Christians today who live lives **consistent** with their commitments.

Christ-Exalting

The next aspect of **faithful Christian ministry** we see here is that it is **Christ-exalting**. Paul is not mostly interested in defending his character, but turning this into an

opportunity to highlight Jesus. As he'll say in ch. 4 – “[W]hat we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (4:5). Paul seeks to be **consistent**, not yes and no, but just yes. Why? Because this reflects who God is and he wants the Corinthians ultimately to find God to be altogether trustworthy for what he has accomplished in Christ.

Paul has already said in v. 18 that “God is faithful.” God is **consistent**. He says here in v. 19 that the reason he seeks to be **consistent** is – “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes.” Paul and his associates – Sylvanus (another name for Silas) and Timothy – had been preaching Christ to the Corinthians, pointing them to him as the resounding and unequivocal YES.

What does that mean? The next phrase explains – “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.” “In Christ is the yes, the grand consummating affirmative, to all God’s promises.”³ “This is another way of saying that all of God’s covenant promises poured out graciously on the human race have crescendoed, with Jesus as their answer.”⁴ Paul is not primarily trying to win the Corinthians over to him as some paragon of integrity. He is pointing them to Jesus as the pinnacle of God’s plan and perfect display of God’s utter dependability. That’s **faithful Christian ministry**, it’s **Christ-exalting**.

This is the crux of the Christian message: our God has a long track record of making promises and he has kept them in the coming of Christ – promises of salvation, “eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which [Paul had] been entrusted by the command of God our Savior” (Tit. 1:2-3).

We could spend forever on all the promises fulfilled in Christ, but let me just sketch a few. Right at the outset after the human race sided with Satan and rebelled against God, God promised that there would be an Offspring of the woman who would crush the skull of the serpent while having his heel fatally bitten (Genesis 3:15). Jesus, born of woman, had an earthly life that was marked by intense opposition by the forces of evil from beginning to end, culminating in his crucifixion. But in his death he destroyed the devil, taking away all his ability to accuse God’s people by paying the penalty himself (e.g. Heb. 2:14).

God made promises to Abraham that in his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Jesus, the Seed of Abraham (cf. Gal. 3:16), came to provide salvation for all peoples and gave a great commission to go into all the world with the Good News (Mt. 28:19), something the Corinthians (and us) are evidence of.

God made promises to David to give him a Son that would sit on his throne forever, ruling over a kingdom. Jesus, a descendant of David, has fulfilled that promise, ascending to the throne of the universe to reign eternally in righteousness (Lk. 1:32-33).

This is just scratching the surface. Read the Bible through the lens of promise and fulfillment and you find God’s faithfulness everywhere. “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it” (Num. 23:19). He is a promise-making and promise-keeping God, unlike any other. They way history all fits together like an intricate lock which Jesus fits into and turns is delightful.

He has made all kinds of promises throughout history that he has kept. And they all contribute to this larger story which culminates in Christ. It’s exquisite. There are

countless types and prophecies that find their fulfillment in Christ, like the promise of a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 or the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. It's exquisite. The God of the Bible says, "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' ...I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it" (Is. 46:9-11). He has made good on this in Jesus – his birth, his life, his death, his burial, his resurrection, his ascension. Everything written about him in the Law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms has been fulfilled (cf. Lk. 24:44). Not one word of God's promises have failed.

You say, "How can I trust God to keep his promises? My life has been so hard!" Where did he promise that life would be easy? In fact, didn't he say, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33)? He promised in multiple places that there would be troubles. He's kept good on that. But he's also promised his presence. But I've had prayers that he didn't answer... right away... exactly how I wanted them to be. Did Jesus promise to do that, to be our genie in a bottle?? Paul himself later in this book says that he prayed multiple times for his thorn in the flesh to be removed, but God did not do that. But he did promise him – "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (12:9). And Paul found that to be true and believers down through the ages have found God to be personally faithful as well.

On the grand canvas of salvation history and in our own personal lives, God's promise of forgiveness, of love, of acceptance, of hope... have all been well tried and proven. You can trust him. You can acknowledge your sin and go to him and know that he will receive you by faith in Jesus. This is Paul's message. This is resounding note of every **faithful Christian ministry**. God has made good on his promises in the gospel!! Respond in faith, in trust.

Paul says that "all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory." "Amen" is a Hebrew word that means – "Uh huh, true dat, right on... YES!" God says, "I've provided salvation in Christ, just as I promised." And by believing we say amen to that and praise God for his faithfulness.

Paul adds in vv. 21-22 – "And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee." Paul's not just **Christ-exalting**, but magnifies the whole Trinity – God the Father who establishes us in Christ and gives us the promised Holy Spirit. The indwelling Spirit with which believers have been anointed is a seal, a stamp verifying God's promise and a guarantee, a down-payment assuring us of what's to come, because there is still one great further act of God to bring salvation to completion, and that is the Second Coming of Christ. We still wait for that. We are not in heaven yet. We are still struggling, still surrounded by the effects of the fall. We still have church fights. We still "see in a mirror dimly" (1Cor. 13:12). We lose sight of Christ and doubt his promises. But the Spirit whom the Father has given to those in Christ will not let us go. He will continue to establish us in the faith and convict us of sin and show us the mercy of Jesus and cause us to cry out, "Abba, Father." Like earnest money guaranteeing what is to come, the Spirit confirms the sureness of God's promises to us.

And the one outstanding promise is his promise to return and set all things right in the world. Some scoffers look at the last 2,000 years and say, “Where is the promise of his coming” (2Pe. 3:4)? But as the Bible says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2Pe. 3:9). His delay in coming again is not a result of his fickleness and vacillation. It’s not a mark against his character, but a demonstration of it.

And we see a reflection of this tender, patient love of Christ in Paul’s delay in coming to visit the Corinthians. In v. 23 he gives more of his reason for changing his travel plans. He says, “But I call God to witness against me – it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth.” Things were severely strained in his relationship. He had made an unexpected painful visit there, followed up by a painful letter. There were some things that were not right in the church in Corinth that needed to change. And to spare coming in judgment, to give them time to repent, Paul decided to wait to come. It’s not because he was flaky. It’s because he loved them. As one commentator puts it:

[F]or their sakes, and because of his overflowing affection for them, he has delayed his coming so that they may have a prolonged opportunity for repentance and setting things in order. This is not a sign of weakness any more than the delay in the second coming of our Lord is a sign of weakness or inability on God’s part to give substance to the judgment that has been threatened against the ungodly.⁵

Or to quote someone else – “Just as God has extended one more opportunity for repentance and restoration to the world by separating the two comings of Christ, Paul too wanted to extend this same opportunity to the Corinthians.”⁶ What a **faithful, Christ-exalting minister** of the gospel!

If there is anyone here today who needs to get right with God, know that he has caused your heart to beat and your lungs to fill with air and your brain to work another day so that you could be here and hear this message about the tender, patient, loving, forgiving God revealed in Christ and the promise that all who come to him in repentance and faith he will receive and never cast away.

Not Controlling

So we’ve seen from this passage that **faithful Christian ministry is consistent, Christ-exalting, and** lastly we see that it is **not controlling**. Paul has just said that he didn’t want to come to Corinth quite yet because he didn’t want to have to exercise his apostolic authority to confront them. But then look at v. 24. He’s quick to qualify that he’s not ultimately the Lord. He states – “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.” Or “...because it is by faith you stand firm” (NIV).

This teaches us a highly important principle. Paul cannot **control** the faith of the Corinthians; that is something completely outside his prerogative, “for no man, even though he be an apostle, has dominion over the faith of another man.”⁷ **Faithful Christian ministry** recognized this and therefore is **not controlling**. We don’t demand,

we commend the truth to each person's conscience. We don't guilt or manipulate. We can't produce or enforce faith, otherwise it wouldn't be genuine faith. John Calvin writes:

Faith should be completely free of any bondage to men. We should note well who it is that says this, for, if ever any mortal man had a right to claim such lordship, Paul was he. Thus we conclude that faith should have no master but the Word of God and is not subject to human control.... spiritual lordship belongs to none but God alone. This is always a settled principle – that pastors have no special lordship over men's consciences because they are ministers and helpers and not lords.⁸

Notice how Paul “exercises considerable restraint because he wants to work ‘with’ them, not ‘on’ them.”⁹ He says that neither he or Silas or Timothy “lord it *over* [their] faith, but [rather] work *with* [them].” **Faithful ministry is not controlling.**

“Paul, moreover, so far from wishing, like some despot, to oppress and subjugate the Corinthians by the relentless imposition of authority, desires to be a helper of their joy.”¹⁰ What a phrase? What a statement of the goal of Christian ministry! He doesn't just want them to fall in line, do what's right, conform to some standard. He wants their happiness. Christianity is not about jumping through hoops; it's about jumping for joy. That can't be forced. We can only faithfully pursuing people and point them to Christ and his amazing love displayed on the cross and try to work with them till they see it.

Conclusion

Faithful ministry is consistent, Christ-exalting, and not controlling. As you look at the Apostle Paul don't you see someone who did this, who genuinely loved the people he was ministering to? What does it mean to love somebody? There are many ways to answer that question, but one would be to say that you love someone when you genuinely want them to be happy.

When is the last time you've felt loved by someone? Can you recall times when you sensed that someone genuinely had your best interests at heart? Truly wanted nothing else besides your true happiness?

And when is the last time that you've gotten the sense that someone else was using you? Wanted something from you, instead of for you?

And what is it that makes someone happy? Is it friends, boyfriends, girlfriends? Sex, stuff, seeing the world? Can money buy happiness? Where is true and lasting joy found? It is only in Christ, where all God's gracious promises find their yes and amen.

Paul is just a faint reflection of Jesus. His goal is to point us to him. Jesus is the only One whose love is perfect. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (Jn. 15:11). Jesus wants your eternal happiness. And that's why he beckons you to himself. He doesn't force you, but he lovingly, patiently calls you right now to give up trying to dig your own muddy cisterns that can't even hold water and to come to him, the fountain of living water, the source of all true, effervescent joy, and drink (cf. Jer. 2:13).

The Lord's Table

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live” (Is. 55:1-3). Jesus said, “[W]hoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:14).

The Lord’s Table is a means of grace where God’s people commemorate what Christ has done to save them and commune with him together as a family. Therefore, only those who are part of God’s people should partake, which in ordinary circumstances are those who have been baptized and are members of this church or another gospel-preaching church.

Benediction

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:23-24).

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, June 21, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ If you want to dig more into the specifics of how things transpired, see George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 101-103.

² Guthrie, 105.

³ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 36.

⁴ Guthrie, 111.

⁵ Hughes, 47.

⁶ Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 84.

⁷ Hughes, 49.

⁸ John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, Calvin’s Commentaries, trans. by T.A. Small (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 26.

⁹ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC (Brentwood: B&H, 1999), 111.

¹⁰ Hughes, 50.