



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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A Faithful Minister
2 Corinthians 4:1-15

It's hard to believe it in some ways, but it's five years this week.

Five years ago today, I began serving as your Senior Pastor here at Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church. My first Sunday was August 7, the first Sunday of August in 2005. I started in the church office, getting things set up and preparing for that first Sunday on Monday, August 1 of that year.

Now I tend to be a reflective, sometimes introspective person, and that's particularly true around significant milestones. I've always thought it's important to take stock from time to time, to look back over our journey and the ground we've covered, and at how God has been at work. And at this juncture of our journey together, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be a *faithful minister*.

Expectations

Now individual church members and congregations as a whole have their expectations about what a minister should be like, about what makes a good minister. Some of those expectations are realistic, and some aren't.

These expectations are formed in a variety of ways. Sometimes they're based on tradition. Sometimes they're based on the model of some previous beloved pastor. Sometimes the expectations are regional or even cultural. Sometimes they're patterned after other professions or even business models. And sometimes they're just a matter of personal preference!

Whatever the basis, for better or worse, expectations are what the members of the congregation eventually evaluate a pastor's ministry by. And often the expectations don't take into consideration differences in personalities, style, experience, or other factors.

Now be honest for a minute . . . What has shaped your expectations of your pastors and the other ministers on your church's staff through the years?

A Biblical Model

If we're serious about Jesus Christ being Lord of his church, then shouldn't *his* expectations be what really counts? Shouldn't we be concerned about *his* expectations much more than our own?

Well, where do we find out what his expectations are? In his Word, in the Bible!

To help us understand *his expectations*, we need to consider the *biblical* standard for a faithful minister. There are many passages that can help us with this, but this morning I want us to focus on this text we read a moment ago from 2 Corinthians 4, where the Apostle Paul

described his understanding of the nature of his ministry to the Corinthians.

The context of what Paul was writing here is very important. Paul had planted a number of churches in many different cities, and had good relationships with all of them—except one.

At times his relationship with the church in Corinth was good, but at times it was very rocky. The Corinthian congregation was a church filled with problems, most of them due to a great deal of spiritual immaturity and self-centeredness. There were divisions centered around personalities and loyalty to different leaders. They only dealt with immoral and divisive church members when Paul forced them to. They were using their spiritual gifts to exalt themselves rather than to build up the church. After Paul had successfully dealt with and corrected some of these problems, some traveling teachers came to town—“super-apostles” Paul calls them in 2 Corinthians 12:11.¹ They questioned Paul’s authority and the validity of his ministry as an apostle, fostering a small-scale rebellion within the congregation. It was a painful experience for Paul, much like that of a loving parent dealing with a rebellious teenager.

But now they were past the crisis, and Paul was writing to bring some closure to this difficult chapter in his relationship with the Corinthian church. In this text we’re looking at this morning (it’s actually a continuation of the line of thought he began in 2:14), Paul described the nature and character of his ministry among the Corinthians.

Paul’s argument runs something like this . . . He knows that he has this ministry by God’s mercy (literally, “just as we have received mercy”). Remember that Paul had been a persecutor whom the risen Lord Jesus had literally stopped in his tracks, saved by his grace, and called to his ministry as an apostle (Acts 9). Since this is true, he says, “we do not lose heart” (4:1).

Rather, Paul says that he has renounced unethical methods—secret and shameful ways, deception, and distortion of God’s word—and clearly preaches the truth. Those who don’t believe are blinded by Satan “so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (4:4). Paul doesn’t preach himself, exalting or calling attention to himself in any way. Rather, he clearly preaches Jesus Christ as Lord, and himself as their servant (literally, “slave”) for Jesus’ sake (4:5). In other words, he was the total opposite of the “super-apostles.” His ministry was characterized by a continual dying to sin and self in the confidence of sharing in Jesus’ resurrection with those he served, all for their benefit and for the glory of God!

The Biblical Standard

Now Paul’s description of his own ministry in this passage helps us determine a clear biblical standard of expectations for a faithful minister. It involves three areas: a clear understanding, uncompromising integrity, and a vital relationship with God.

First, a clear understanding. A faithful minister has to have a clear understanding of several things.

There must be a clear understanding of *God’s call*, and that we who are called have our ministry by the mercy of God. It’s not because of our own goodness or works or abilities—none of us can attain salvation by these, much less such a call as this!

The experiences of this call are as many and different as the number of ministers God calls. Paul’s experience was dramatic, and so is that of many ministers. Mine was very quiet. I had been nurtured into the kingdom, trusting Jesus and being baptized at the age of seven. When I was nine, I was watching Billy Graham on TV one night. I was overcome by this incredibly powerful sense of God’s presence. And I knew. I went and told my mother through tears that God was calling me to be a preacher. I knew it that night just as surely as I know it now after 35

years of preaching and 30 years of ordained ministry! There's a mystery in that call, but we must understand that it comes from God, and that it's by his mercy.

The faithful minister must also have a clear understanding of *the nature of our message*. We must preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord! We must proclaim the good news of salvation, of God's revelation of himself in Christ! We must focus on the gospel—that through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God has done for us what we couldn't do for ourselves, and that death is not the end because we have the hope of sharing in Jesus' resurrection! And we must teach God's people what all this means for how we live in this life as disciples of Jesus in the fellowship of his church.

There must also be a clear understanding of *the minister's relationship to the church*. Ministers are not lords over the church, but rather shepherds. I love the way Paul puts it: "your servants for Jesus' sake." He understood Jesus' emphasis on servant-leadership—the kingdom kind of leadership! You remember how Jesus put it, don't you? "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43b-45).

Now that doesn't mean that a minister doesn't have any authority; quite the contrary! Paul was quick to claim and assert his apostolic authority when necessary. But he clearly stated that this servant leadership authority is the authority to build up the body of Christ, not to tear it down (2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10).

From what we see in the writings of the New Testament and a collection of documents from the first several centuries called the *Apostolic Fathers*, the ministers of the early church had two priorities. One was the Word of the Lord in all its expressions (in Scripture, in the prophetic word by the Spirit, and in the true tradition about Jesus). The other was the well-being of the church. These concerns guided the ministry in the early church, and should guide ministers today as well!

The second area: uncompromising integrity. It's sad but true—there is sometimes a scandalous lack of integrity among some ministers today, just as there was in Paul's day.

Faithfulness as a minister calls for uncompromising integrity *in our lifestyle*. We will not be perfect, but the overall tenor and trajectory of our lives must have integrity. A faithful minister must live a life characterized by wholeness and moral soundness and uprightness.

We must have integrity *in our motives*. We must be serving Christ and his people, not ourselves. We must serve for the good of Christ's church, not for personal glory or gain. We must minister out of a genuine desire to serve Christ and care for his people. Our motives must be selfless and pure.

Our methods must also have integrity. The end does not justify the means. While there is room for variety and creativity in our methods, they must be consistent with the message of the gospel. If the message and the methods clash, the message will be lost in the fallout. Our methods must have integrity. We must never manipulate people or approach them under false pretenses in any way. Not only will it bring reproach on the gospel of Christ; in the long run it will turn people away from him.

So we must have uncompromising integrity *in our ministry of the Word*. We must deal with it faithfully and honestly and in the entirety of its message. There is no room for laziness in the ministry of the Word. To be faithful ministers, we must give ourselves and our very best efforts to the Word, to be mastered by it so we can preach and teach it faithfully to God's people and proclaim the gospel to the world.

Or to sum it all up, we must have uncompromising integrity *in our faithfulness to the call.*

Eugene Peterson is one of my favorite authors. In his book *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*,² he takes the ministry of Protestant churches in North America to task for having abandoned the biblical and historical role of pastoral ministry. He says that most pastors have become religious shopkeepers, running the church like a business, giving the customers what they want. He argues that for pastoral ministry to have integrity, the visible lines of pastoral ministry (preaching, teaching, and administration) must be brought together into a triangle through being connected by the angles of prayer, Scripture, and spiritual direction.

In other words, for ministers to have real integrity, they must be *shepherds*, not CEOs or shopkeepers or therapists. They must be committed to pleasing God and being true to their calling even when the people are not pleased with them.

And that leads us to **the third area: a vital relationship with God.**

A faithful minister must have a genuine experience of God revealed in Christ. There must be a personal encounter, a firsthand knowledge of God, a genuine commitment that's being lived out in the minister's daily walk with Christ in a life of prayer.

You see, the only way we can really do this thing called ministry in a genuine way is to depend on God. As Paul emphasized in 2 Corinthians 3, it's only through him and his surpassing power that we can be sufficient and competent for this incredible task. We must depend on him for our faithfulness, and for our power in ministry.

It really is a matter of submitting ourselves and our ministries to God, to be used as he desires to his glory!

So from Paul's description of his understanding of his ministry, we see that *the biblical standard for a faithful minister involves clear understanding, uncompromising integrity, and a vital relationship with God.*

A Solemn Pledge

Now I make no claim to perfection. I fail at many points. But I want you to know that *these* are the guidelines for ministry I strive to follow. There may be times you disagree with me on how I go about something or where I am trying to lead you as your pastor, but be assured that I do what I do from deep biblical and theological convictions and in humble dependence on God, with concern for the church and with integrity of heart and mind.

So this morning, I want to renew with you the covenant vows I pledged when I was installed as your pastor . . .

I covenant together with God and with the congregation of the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church to be a faithful minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; to be diligent in my study of God's Word that I might guide this people in a life of prayer and fellowship with God; to lead this congregation in the worship of Almighty God; to preach and to teach them the Bible, sound Christian doctrine, Christian history, and the Christian way of life, so that they may grow as disciples of Jesus Christ and the body may be built up in unity and nurtured toward maturity; to lead this church in its mission and ministry to our community and beyond; and to provide pastoral care and spiritual guidance to this people through a ministry of presence, prayer and counsel, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep.

Amen.

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987).