

THE TEST OF A FRUITFUL MINISTER

2 Corinthians 5:11–21

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2 Corinthians 5:11–21 (NIV)

“Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

All through 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks of his ministry and our ministry. All of us have a ministry. Some of us here grew up with the idea that the ministers were people who stood behind pulpits and preached and everybody else simply watched as spectators. But as we became a man and put away childish concepts, we found that indeed all of God's people are God's servants,

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which is the real meaning of ministers—those who serve Him and serve others on His behalf.

Second Corinthians gives to us extremely helpful insights into our ministry as Christians. This passage especially shows us, in an autobiographical way, some of the principles that made Paul a very fruitful servant or minister of Jesus Christ. I've therefore entitled this message, for our application, "The Test of a Fruitful Minister." All of us want to be fruitful for the Lord. What are the principles by which we can measure our fruitfulness?

Let me give five tests, in the form of questions, that arise quite naturally out of this passage.

I. The first simply is this: Do you fear the Lord?

The fruitful minister, a fruitful servant of God, is one who has fear of the Lord. Paul says in verse 11, "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men." We recognize that when we speak of fearing the Lord, or fearing God, that there are two kinds of fear in respect to God. One of them, we don't have as Christians. And the other we do have. The one we do not have is a fear which is a cowering, awesome dreadfulness of meeting God. As a Christian, we do not dread meeting God. Our fear is not a pulverizing fear. That's the kind of fear that's described in Revelation 6, when the kings of the earth, the generals, the mighty, the rich, the free, and the slave that are unprepared to meet Christ have, when they see Him returning and they cry for the rocks and the hills and the mountains to fall upon them and hide them from the face of Christ.

The most fundamental fear that unsaved people have is not the fear of death. It is the fear of God. You say, "A lot of the people I know that aren't Christians aren't afraid of God at all." The point the Scripture makes is that when it is that person's destiny to meet God and they have a choice of choosing death or God, the man or woman who is unprepared to meet God would, in every instance, choose death rather than meeting God unprepared. That's why in that day, when the Lord comes, the unprepared are asking to be killed rather than to meet Him. It's a dreadful fear

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of meeting God. But we have been saved from that fear. The fear that Paul is speaking about as a Christian is the kind of fear which is in reverence toward the Lord, which lives in awe toward the Lord and in respect for the judgment which is coming upon this world.

When we live with that kind of awe toward the Lord, all we need to do is turn to the Gospels and find that when Jesus did some of His great miracles, such as walking on the water or raising a paralytic, the disciples were in awe of Him. And the Christian ought to have a reverential fear of the Lord, a basic bottom-line respect for God. When we have this fear, Paul says, “We know that God is going to judge the world through Christ, and we try to persuade men.” So our evangelism is a testimony to the fact that the fear is there. Just as if we saw a fire burning up a building, we would have a respect for the harm that fire can do. Knowing the fear of the fire, we persuade people to leave the building. So there is a sense that, when we know God is going to judge the world, we also take steps to persuade others of Him.

So the first question that determines fruitfulness of ministry is: “Do you fear the Lord?” For those believers who kind of sit back at ease and don’t believe that a day of judgment is ever coming, there’s no necessity to worry about anything—in the sweet by and by everything’s going to be ok for everybody—they are not fruitful in their walk or their ministry. “Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11), Paul says.

II. The second test of a fruitful minister is simply this: Is your conscience clean?

The later part of verse 11 Paul makes this statement: “What we are is plain to God and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.” One of the things that continually happened to Paul at Corinth is that there were critics he had in the church, seeking to undermine his integrity and his apostleship. If they could do that, then they could damage the church itself, because the church would then begin to build upon the false doctrine and people’s lives would wind up in

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shipwreck. Paul, therefore, had no interest in defending himself, per se, he was only interested in defending himself in order to protect the integrity of the church. And there are times when allegations may be made, when it is necessary to defend ourselves because a greater issue than our own ego is at stake. Paul's saying, when his motives are attacked and when his apostleship is attacked, "What may be known about me is plain to God. And it also," he says to the Corinthians, "should be plain to you" (2 Corinthians 5:11). It's obviously not plain to the critics because they look at his outer appearance, which was not all that impressive. Paul says, "They have an outer impression, but they don't have a corresponding internal attitude that is open and plain to God."

Throughout the apostle's life and ministry, you can see him talking about this matter of a clean conscience. When he is going to Jerusalem, where he will be arrested, he appears before the Roman procreator and he appeals to him that he has kept a good conscience before God. As he approaches death in 2 Timothy, he tells he has lived before God with a good conscience. If we are going to be effective for the Lord in our life and in our ministry, then we're going to need to be free from guilt in our conscience.

"Conscience" literally means "co-knowledge." It means "knowledge of self that corresponds with a moral or spiritual law that is true." Our conscience is not clear when we profess what we do not possess. Our conscience is not clear when we are guilty about the way we have treated someone. Our conscience is not clear when we have offended God in areas of money and morals. Years ago, as a child, I learned the importance of keeping a clear conscience and not letting a wrongful deed build up. I was never a bad kid, really. But I did one day, when I was ten years of age, keep an extra nickel in change that a clerk in a store had given me without reporting it. I didn't act on that until I got serious with God, about six years later. When I was trying to press

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through to a relationship with God, it seems like the only thing the Holy Spirit could say to me was, “What about that nickel?” I tried to find the store to return it and I couldn’t find it. I don’t know if I finally gave the nickel in the offering or what, but I had to get that off my conscience. Somebody would look at that and say, “Pastor, you were psychologically disturbed to be in that fetish about a nickel.” But there is a very valid sense that, if we’re faithful with the nickels, God can make us faithful over much. If we’ll clean our conscience in the small things, we can clean our conscience more easily when it comes to the big matters.

I recall, in college, stealing a test and doing well on the test, but I couldn’t get anywhere with the Lord for a whole year, until I made things right and got my conscience clean. I found that I couldn’t pray when my conscience was stained. I couldn’t witness when my conscience was stained. I didn’t even enjoy reading God’s Word when my conscience was stained. Paul knows that the key to a fruitful ministry in life—a free flowing relationship with the Lord and others—is keeping our conscience clean. When we’ve done something wrong, when we’ve hurt somebody, offended somebody, offended God, we’re either going to see our conscience cleansed or—by not doing anything about it—we’re going to see our conscience seared. When our conscience is cleansed, then we can have worship with God and minister to others.

In fact, in verse 13, Paul says this about what his conscience had allowed him to do: “If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God. If we are in our right mind, it is for you.” The first phrase of verse 13 is somewhat difficult to translate—“If we are out of our mind.” It can literally mean one of two things. In the original, it simply could be translated, “If we are ‘ecstasized’ it is for God.” There are those who looked at all that Paul was doing and his self-sacrifice and were saying of him, “You’re bananas for going to all those limits to invest your life in others, especially when they don’t appreciate it.” “You’re crazy to live the kind of migrant life you live

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for the gospel.” “You’re out of your mind!” Paul says, “If that charge is true, I’m out of my mind for the sake of God.” But it may well be that there’s another meaning to that—the one that I prefer. That Paul says, “If we are ecstatic, it is for God.” It’s a word which is used in Acts to describe Peter as being in a trance and receiving a vision. It’s a word also used in Acts 22 to describe Paul when he received his call to be a missionary to the Gentiles. He was in a trance, praying in the temple. To be “ecstasized” is to be out of one’s body. To be in a kind of elevated spiritual experience with God.

When you think of it, the Christians are divided into almost two camps. The Spirit Christians, who place great emphasis upon experiencing God. And the Word Christians, who are always saying, “Know the Word of God,” and, “You can’t trust experience.” Yet Paul shows us this model, in verse 13, that a clean conscience allows one to be Spirit-oriented and caught up in a religious experience with God that is mystical and edifies the heart. And speaking with other tongues, on a personal level, and being caught up in prayer experiences will allow us to be ecstasized, to be in a spirit of exalted joy and have a vibrant relationship with the Lord. But when we turn right around, if we’re going to minister to others, we’ve got to be Word-oriented.

We’ve got to be in our mind for others. So Paul says he has these two kinds of natures. This being caught up into God, and on the other hand, when it comes to ministering to others, being in his right mind, for the purpose of edifying them. A clean conscience allowed him this kind of freedom with God and with others.

III. The third test of a fruitful ministry is to ask the question: Does Christ’s love compel you?

Not only was the fear of the Lord compelling Paul and determining his ministry to be fruitful, but the love of the Lord was compelling him as well. The idea in the King James is “The love of the

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Lord constrains us.” Maybe “constrains” and “compels” are both right. On the one hand, the love of the Lord is like a leash around us, which reins us in and brings disciplined control to our life.

Yet, on the other hand, it is a compelling force that motivates us to serve the Lord.

Sometimes, when I’m doing a wedding ceremony, I’ll give a little homily or sermon that consists of these three points, talking to the bride and groom about the three kinds of love: There is knowing the dictionary definition of love. There is behavioral love, which knows how love acts. But the third kind of love is experiential love. Can you remember, or do you know of a time when you felt loved? The love of Christ compelling us involves knowing more than the theological words of the cross—knowing that God’s love is *agape* more than *phileo*. The real love of Christ compelling us means more than simply going through the actions of being a Christian. It is receiving the heart of God and showing the heart of God to others in the experience of both giving and receiving love.

Of course, where the Lord lets us know we are loved is in His cross. In dying for us He shows us the limit to which His love will go. That love compels us in our relationship with other people.

The love of Christ.

I’m reminded of a story about Lawrence of Arabia. In 1915, they were going through the desert and suddenly somebody noticed that Jasmine was missing in the desert sandstorm. All the other men that were in the party debated to what had happened to him. Whether he’d lost his mind in the desert storm or fallen off his camel or what. Then one of them came to the conclusion that it didn’t matter. He wasn’t worth half a crown, anyway. But Lawrence turned around and went back, through that blistering sandstorm. The company had been almost out of water. He went back and, an hour and a half later, found him, half-crazed by the desert sand and wind. He brought him up on his camel and took him back to the group, giving him the last drops from his

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water canteen. When Lawrence came back and the other men saw them, they marveled at the love of Lawrence of Arabia—to rescue the man who was not worth half a crown.

It's very real imagery of the love that motivated the Lord to come and risk himself to save us. It is that kind of risk venture that we expose ourselves to when we truly love somebody else. We're willing to risk for them, because love is compelling us.

IV. The fourth thing that Paul is saying to us regarding the test of fruitful ministry: Do we look at others through the eyes of faith?

We no longer look at anybody from a human or worldly point of view. Paul says, "I once did this to Jesus. I saw Him simply as a man, a human being." It may well be that Paul, in his preconversion life, had met Jesus in Jerusalem, perhaps even heard Jesus teach, maybe he saw Jesus die. He regarded Him as a human being. But he says, "Now, since I met Him, I no longer regard Him from a human point of view." This is not, as some of the cults say of Paul's statement, that there's a difference between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. They are one and the same person. But he simply says that, when he really met Jesus, he understood that Jesus was not only the man of the earth, but He was the Son of God, the man from heaven. His perspective was changed from the Damascus Road on. And because his perspective of Jesus was changed, his perspective towards Jesus changed. When I have a vision of Jesus that changes my outlook on life, I can change my attitude toward others as well.

That's exactly what Paul is saying, "We don't regard anyone from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation." The problem with many Corinthians is that they still act like the old creation. But Paul spoke and dealt with them from the vantage point—from the eyes—of faith, calling them "saints" even, when they didn't deserve it. If you want to really change somebody, if you're ministering to them to change them, the only way you're

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successfully going to do that is to believe in them. And believe that the end result of their life is going to turn out Christlike.

So many times people, young people especially, have a difficult time with older Christians and the inconsistencies they see in older Christians. I think young people need to have this eye of faith too—that looks at a person and does not require that they be perfect, but—through the eyes of faith—sees that Christ is in the process of perfecting them.

I was thinking of all the Christians I know well. Of all the people I know well...I don't know any one that is perfect. I can name faults of anyone that I know well. You might say, "I know people well and they don't have any faults."

How do we bring about change? Through the eye of faith on other people. Do what Jesus did with Simon when He saw him—calling him "rock," calling him "stable," believing in him when it had not yet come to pass. Looking at others through the eyes of faith.

V. A fifth test of a fruitful minister is to answer the question: Are you Christ's ambassador of reconciliation?

Two words which are not used too frequently in daily speech—"ambassador" and "reconciliation." Five times in the last four verses of chapter 5, the word "reconciliation" is used. It means "to conciliate." It describes a couple when they have been separated—being reunited. They have been reconciled.

We, through Christ, have been reconciled to God, because we were separated from Him. It's interesting that the Scripture never speaks of God as being reconciled to us. The fault was not on God's side. We are the ones always described as being reconciled to God. Because God has reconciled us to himself, He has given us the privilege and responsibility of bringing the message

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of reconciliation to others. People, by and large, do not need to know what's wrong with them. They already know.

When I'm ministering on Sunday, I don't get up and say, "How can I get up this morning and tell everybody how bad they are?" If you've come to worship, you're already conscious when you come that there are things you'd like cleaned between you and God, if they're not already cleaned up. But God gives to us this glorious message of reconciliation, that says He is willing not to count our trespasses against us, but to make us—through the death of Christ—the very righteousness of God. We are ambassadors. We tell others the glorious news of reconciliation. What kind of ambassador are we? There are many different ways to think of what is involved in being an ambassador. If you were an ambassador today, you'd be someone who represented your country in a foreign land, spoke on behalf of your own country in an official way; and acted in a way that was honorable to the interests of your home country. In that same manner, if we are an ambassador for the Lord in the modern sense, we speak as members of the kingdom of God. We are not in our home country. This world is not my home. But we speak on God's behalf. We speak an authoritative message and we act honorably.

In the Roman world, however, the world in which Paul writes, the word "ambassador" had other meanings. It could mean "someone who served as an administrator over an imperial province." Or, the way Paul uses it here, most likely, is to describe a process whereby the Roman Empire would incorporate a conquered land into its empire. When a country had been conquered, the Roman senate would appoint ten of its own members, ten senators, to go as "ambassadors" to meet with the victorious general and the conquered government, and to dictate to them the terms of peace. To show them how they were to be incorporated into the Roman Empire, to determine the boundaries of their area, and to chart their new Constitution. When all the written documents

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had been drafted, these were then brought back by the ambassadors to Rome for approval. They were in charge of bringing people in to the Roman family.

And Paul uses that in the sense of our mission as Christians., that we are given the opportunity of representing the conqueror, Jesus Christ. It is our privilege to let others know the terms of His peace, and to bring them into the family of God. We are Christ's ambassadors.

Paul closes this chapter by saying, "God made Him to be sin for us" (verse 21). We do not know all the mystery that's involved in the atonement, nor what all Christ went through emotionally when He was separated from God on our behalf. None of us have ever fully known what the Lord went through for us. But we know that a transaction was made that He who had no sin was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God.

Are we fruitful in our life for the Lord? Do you fear the Lord? Is your conscience clean? Does the Lord's love compel you? Do you look at others through the eyes of faith? Are you Christ's ambassador of reconciliation?

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we close this time of ministry today conscious of Your presence, knowing that these are searching words and searching questions, from Your heart to ours. There are many fears that people have within this body. Some have a fear of retirement, a fear of ill health, a fear of making the money stretch, a fear of what's going to happen to their kids. But Lord, our basic fear and our basic reverence is reverence towards You. Knowing that we have met with You takes away all of the cringing and the pulverizing, the scaring fear. In its place, we have an awe of wonder and glory. Lord, our purpose in life is to balance our love for You with a deep respect of our life in worship, given to You. You are the one who loves us. You are also our Lord. I pray for those in this service today whose conscience is not clean, who look at what they've done to

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other people and know that what they've done is not right. Who may look at what they may have done on their IRS form, who look at how they've handled their business manners, how they've handled people. How they have, perhaps, not discharged responsibilities to You. Lord, You've said that if we come to You, draw near to You, You would draw near to us (James 4:8). That we could be clean through the Word and through the Spirit, through the washing of water, and the washing of the blood. So wash us, Lord, with the water of Your presence. Wash us with the blood of Your forgiveness. Let us stand before You with a clear conscience. There are people we need to go to to make things right, to make restitution. Let this worship service not end with the "amen." But let it only end when we have completed the process of sharing with someone else something that will bring us into a state of cleansing in our conscience. Lord, let our service to You not be one simply of duty or obligation. May we be gripped by Your love. Help us to look at others through the eyes of faith. And to always be aware of our grand responsibility, that whether we are a wife, a clerk, a student, an executive, a husband, we have even yet one higher calling: We're an ambassador of Yours, charged to bring the message of reconciliation to others. May we be ambassadors of distinction for You. We ask these things in Your name. Amen.