

THE FAITHFULNESS FACTOR

2 Corinthians 3:1-6; 4:1-5, 15-18; 5:9-10

I used to have a pickup truck that had “starting” issues. I would turn the key and sometimes all that happened was the “click-click” of the solenoid. Ten minutes later, it might start and it might not. If it was on a hill, I could push it and get it started. I put in a new starter and the same thing would happen. Most of the time, it started without any problem. Other than that, it was a good truck. You have probably known people who would tell you they would do something but nothing would ever get done. After three or four episodes like this, then you stop relying on that person to do anything. I traded the truck for a new truck and if the person on whom you could not rely were an employee, you would probably terminate the person from the job. So, how important is knowing that you can rely on something or someone? I think most people would put the importance of reliability at a very high level.

In our “churchianity” conversations we tend to think of faithfulness as being related to whether we attend church regularly, give to our church or help with the various ministries of the church. In a more general sense, the idea of faithfulness and reliability are identical. The real question for each of us is not so much is our car reliable or are our friends reliable, but is simply “are we reliable?” As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in his second letter to them, he asked “Who is adequate for such things?” We should endeavor to live in such a way that we can answer that question with a positive affirmation of “we are.” That leads to another question and that is “how do you do that?”

Rely on God: 3:1-6

¹ Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? ² You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; ³ being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. ⁴ Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, ⁶ who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 (NASB95)

In order to better understand Paul’s opening question in Chapter three, we need to go back a couple of verses to see his answer to the question “Who is adequate for such things?” In the very next verse, he makes a seemingly bold statement: “For we are.” Most translations render this as “For we are not like others ...” If we change the punctuation in that verse, then we see that Paul is asserting that he and his team are adequate and it sounds as if he is writing his own letter of recommendation which is seen in the question at the beginning of Chapter three. The answer to the question of them commending themselves or if they needed letters of commendation to or from the church at Corinth, is a decided “No!” Instead of a letter, all anyone would need to do is look at the church at Corinth. The transformation of these people from pagan beliefs and practices and all the turmoil they had been through in learning to walk in the way of Lord was a living testimony of the power of the gospel and the fact that God had worked through Paul and his associates to bring out the salvation of those Christians in Corinth.

Paul had a lot of confidence – not in himself or his fellow workers, but his confidence was in God. Let’s read what he said regarding their adequacy: “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.” That testimony also speaks of integrity since there was no delusion that he should get any credit for what God was accomplishing through him.

Not only was their adequacy from God, it was God who caused it to happen with the

result that they were adequate servants or ministers of a new covenant that focuses on the spirit of the covenant and not on the details of the words used to describe what God would like to see in all our relationships. Paul emphasized the importance of looking at the intent of the message rather than getting caught up in the grammatical nuances because he realized that was what caused many of the Jews to miss the point of their relationship with God. We also need to be careful as we share our faith with others in reaching out to a lost world that we don't get caught up in a lot of "do's and don't's" rather than focusing on a personal relationship with God through the completed work of Jesus and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. If the relationship is right, then the "do's and don't's" will take care of themselves. If we are more concerned about whether a person has been baptized by submersion rather than being concerned that he or she is immersed in the character of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, then we are missing the point of the Great Commission.

By what means did God make them (and us) sufficient for all these things related to the new covenant and the work of the kingdom of God? The first and absolute critical enablement is the work of the cross by which we put the old nature to death and that is followed by the new birth by which we have new nature that is able to commune with God and be a part of the kingdom of God. The second is the filling of the Holy Spirit and the gifts, ministries, and activities of the Spirit which equip us and empower us for the work of the kingdom of God. The final thing is the revelation of the gospel message on which we stand.

Stand by The Gospel: 4:1-5

¹Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, ²but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. 2 Corinthians 4:1-5 (NASB95)

It is important that we recognize that we have a ministry that needs to be fulfilled. God saved us for a purpose and it is to carry out the work of the Kingdom of God (Eph 2:8-10). Just because we have difficulties along the way does not make the need to be faithful in carrying out what we are called to do go away. As Paul described it, "we faint not." The reason that we can go on (if we will go on) is that God has provided the grace (mercy or help) to do so.

Many times Christians will recognize that a job needs to be done and when difficulty comes they will not give up on getting the job done, but they will resort to non-Christian means to accomplish the task. Paul shows us by his example that this is not necessary and certainly not desirable. We are to turn our backs on deceitfulness, dishonesty and trickery and simply operate in a truthful and open way knowing that these "hidden" things are not hidden to God and He is the One Whom we must ultimately please.

If we really want to be successful in all of eternity, then we do want to please God because it is He who makes us successful. We really don't have the power within ourselves to carry out our mission in life.

Regarding verse five, Paul does not directly state they were the slaves of Christ, though they were, and he considered it their greatest honor to be so. This relationship is implied in the statement that they were preaching him as "Lord." It would seem that he was saying that he preached they were the slaves of those in Corinth when he wrote that "they preached themselves as their slaves." John Gill made the argument that Paul is being much broader in that he was referring to the church (in a universal sense) for the sake of Christ. We could make the argument

that we cannot claim to be slaves of the Lord and slaves of men (men pleasers), because no man can serve two masters. They could claim to be slaves to the church with regard to spiritual things such as preaching the word and administration of ordinances – all for the sake of Christ.

Concentrate on The Eternal: 4:15-18

¹⁵For all things *are* for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. ¹⁶Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, ¹⁸while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:15-18 (NASB95)

It would seem that verse 15 picks up on the idea that other people benefit when we focus on serving God through Jesus Christ. We could also make a case to include in “all things” such things as the incarnation, the obedience, death, and resurrection of Christ, are all for the sake of God’s elect. Beyond that, the ministry of the apostles and others, the gifts of the Spirit, graces, comforts, and experiences could be included in “all things.” Not only the good things but the reproaches, afflictions, and persecutions were for the ultimate benefit of the church. These things were endured for their sakes, and worked together to help establish their faith and to advance the Gospel.

We need to help interpret to the world around us what is happening when we experience trouble. We need to make a good confession of the faith that we have regarding these things. Living life in such a triumphant way will draw others to Jesus and we will be able to see, either in this world or the next, that all things really do work together for good to them that love the Lord. I believe that this is what Paul is talking about when, in verse 12, he said, "So then death works in us, but life in you."

Paul had discovered that true life does not consist of physical things. Let's face it, the physical nature that we have is temporary. We slow down, our bodies age, we can't do as much as we used to. In spite of all that, spiritually we can and must become more and more vigorous with each passing day. After all, all of life in the physical is but a very short time compared with all of eternity and we would do well to spend the short time we have preparing for that which is to come. This means that we have to look beyond what we can see and experience in the physical and see that God really is in control and wants what is best for us. As we recognize this, we can view problems in an entirely new light and see the hand of God at work in our lives to transform us into the image of His Son, Jesus.

This transforming process is not to take place in some secluded monastic life style, but will happen as we go about life fulfilling the ministry to which God has called us. By its very nature, ministry is related to others. As we go about this job to which we are called, we will find perplexity, frustration and trouble. We see within these things that God provides the help we need to overcome and be victorious. We have hope beyond this life because of the resurrection of Christ and even though we may not see the good that comes from the problems that we encounter in this life, we will eventually see it. This process is just that, it is a process and we experience it on a daily basis. Daily we put the old nature to death, daily our physical bodies have less vigor, daily we walk closer to God, daily we are renewed inwardly. And we "keep on keeping on" because we are projecting beyond this life which we realize is temporary, knowing that what God has prepared for us in eternity is going to be so glorious that we can't even imagine how great it will be.

Anticipate the Future: 5:9-10

⁹Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 (NASB95)

In Stephen Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, habit two is "begin with the end in mind." Covey suggested that we might think in terms of being able to hear what people would be saying about us and our life as they passed by our casket. The problem with this picture is that your casket is NOT the end. One of the lessons that we need to learn is that when we are in a process of planning a project that our planning must go beyond the specific project and look past that point to a logical next step.

If we do financial planning that will take us up to retirement, then we may find that what we have is woefully inadequate to take us through retirement and up to the point of our demise. We also have to think beyond that event with regard to our spouse, our children, or our church, etc. Of course, we realize that life is more – much more – than financial. We need to be considering "life planning" and consider what happens beyond the funeral because that is not the end.

If we are (as Covey suggested) concerned about what people will say about us as they attend our funeral, then we have slipped into the error of thinking that we need to "serve others" and have missed the point that we "serve the Lord" and others will benefit from such dedication and service. As we look beyond the casket and beyond the grave, then we find that our accountability is not to men but to God as we stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Paul said "we must all appear." That would include the saints as well as others, ministers and people, persons of all ranks and conditions, of every nation, age, and gender; there will be no avoiding this judgment, all "must appear" and receive a reward for the things done in his body. The "things" would include words, actions, and all the secret thoughts of the mind, and counsels of the heart, which will be made manifest.

The reward or recompense will be according to what was done, whether it is good or bad. The reward of good works will be of grace, and not of merit. Good works will be considered at the last judgment, not as causes of eternal life and happiness, to which the saints will be judged; but will be produced in open court as fruits of grace, and as evidences of the truth of faith, which will justify the Judge in proceeding according to what He Himself, as Savior, has said, "he that believeth shall be saved, he that believeth not shall be damned." The reward of bad works will be in strict and just proportion, according to the nature of what was done.

This is the reason that Paul stated in verse nine, "our ambition - purpose - objective in all of life is to be pleasing to Him."