

John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul both exemplify the character of a minister of Christ. A minister of Christ should be above reproach, not a slave to the pleasures of this life, not greedy or easily offended, but able to teach and be faithful to what God has entrusted to him. John was not a reed shaking in the wind, tossed around by whatever was popular to the crowd. Paul wasn't concerned at all by the judgments and scrutinizing of men. Both men proclaimed God's Word without wavering. This is what every minister of the gospel should aspire to be. Every father of his home should imitate them as well. Every Christian who confesses the truth of God's Word to his children, friends, or neighbors should learn from this example of John and Paul. And yet, as staunch and unmovable as they were in their duties, John and Paul still needed the nurture of God's Word. They needed Christ as their Savior. They needed the comfort of his Word and the peace that comes only from him.

This is why John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him if he was the one who was to come. Even as John sends his disciples to Jesus, he himself wants to hear the same consoling and assuring words of his Lord. This is also why Paul, after saying that he didn't need to be judged by anyone and that he was not aware of anything against him, still admits, "But that does not justify me." Both John and Paul knew that they could not be justified before God because of how strong they were as his ministers. Though they strove to be faithful and immovable in their calling to proclaim the Word of God, they knew that their salvation and security did not rest on their own stability.

Paul, who preached that no one can be declared righteous by his own works, also knew this about himself. He needed God to justify him. He needed the blood of Christ to declare him righteous and cover his sins. He needed the Spirit of God to give him faith and a good conscience. Despite how hard Paul worked to remain blameless in the face of those who tried to nitpick at him, only Christ, who came into this world to save sinners, could give him the peace he needed more than anything.

In the same way, John, who proclaimed repentance for the forgiveness of sins, knew that he also needed that same gift of God's mercy. He pointed to Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and he knew that this included his own sins as well. He wasn't intimidated by the Pharisees and Priests who flaunted their status in front of him. He knew he was right to call Herod to repentance for taking his brother's wife. He knew that he was sitting in prison as an innocent man. He was a manly and brave preacher, but he knew that he couldn't rely on his own gumption and bravery in the face of God's judgment. He still needed the assurance that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of God, who was coming into the world.

When John's disciples came to Christ to ask him if he was the one who was coming, they also asked if they should look for someone else. Should we look for someone other than Christ? Is there some other religion that can give us what we need? There are plenty of popular preachers and religious gurus who offer all sorts of goodies. Some might offer health and wealth. Others might simply show you how to feel like a Christian while still following the fads of the world. St. Paul warned Timothy that the times would come when people would not listen to sound teaching but acquire for themselves teachers to give them what their itching ears want to hear (2 Tim 4:3).

John was not teaching his disciples to look for a popular preacher. They all knew that Jesus performed amazing miracles and signs. They knew that Jesus spoke with authority and attracted large crowds. But John wanted to be sure of one thing. Is Jesus the Christ? Is Jesus the Lord who promised he would come? Is Jesus the one spoken of by the prophets? Because if he isn't, then it doesn't matter how

many great works he does, and it doesn't matter how great his following is. As he sat alone in his prison cell, John needed certainty that the salvation God commanded him to proclaim was actually coming.

So Jesus told these disciples to go back and tell John what they have heard and seen. He then lists the things that the Scriptures specifically associate with the coming of the Lord Christ. In the Old Testament, God would cure leprosy as a sign that he makes his people holy. He also gave it as a punishment for unclean and sinful acts. So if a man shows up curing leprosy, then this is a clear sign that he is from God. The prophets also speak of a time when God would raise the dead, just as he did through his prophets Elijah and Elisha. But what about curing the blind, the lame, and the deaf? Isaiah specifically said that the coming Christ would accomplish these very acts. In Isaiah 35, the prophet says:

Tell those who are worried: "Have courage, don't be afraid. Look, your God comes with vengeance; God will pay back. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be opened. The lame man will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing. For waters will gush in the wilderness, and streams will flow in the desert. (Is 35:4-6)

And yet, this isn't all Jesus mentions. The last great act of the coming Christ he saves for last. It is that the poor have the good news preached to them. Listen to what Isaiah also says:

On that day the deaf will hear the words written in a book, the blind coming out of their gloom and darkness will see. The humble will find a new joy in the LORD, and the poorest of people will delight in the Holy One of Israel. (Is 29:18).

And again, Isaiah also records the words of the Anointed One, also known as the Messiah or the Christ:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because the LORD anointed me to tell good news to those who are suffering. He sends me to bandage the brokenhearted, to announce liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners, to announce a year when the LORD will accept people and a day of vengeance for our God, to comfort all who mourn. (Is 61:1-2)

Jesus knew what John and his disciples were asking. John needed something much more than awe inspiring words and actions. He needed to be pointed to the words of the prophets. He needed the assurance that God's Word has been fulfilled. Jesus didn't come to show off with magic tricks and gain a following with his charismatic speeches. No, he came to fulfill what his own prophets, centuries earlier, said he would do. And this all leads up to this central action of our Savior. He proclaims good news to the poor.

Perhaps John was waiting for Jesus to fulfill those other words spoken by Isaiah, to "announce liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners." John sits in prison, wrongfully condemned, punished for doing the right thing. Yet, Jesus doesn't open up his cell and let him out. Instead, Jesus proclaims liberty to him. He proclaims freedom to him. Here is a much greater freedom than a presidential pardon or a prison break. Our Lord declares freedom from sin and guilt, from the fear of death and eternal condemnation.

It was the same for Paul. In his second letter to the Corinthians he speaks of a thorn in his flesh, which was troubling him, and he asked Jesus to take it away. But the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, because my strength is made perfect in weakness." Paul thereby learned to find his strength only in the

Lord who died for him, forgives him, justifies him, and promises to exalt him. He was then able to say near the end of his life as he sat in prison, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. There is now waiting for me that crown of righteousness, which Christ the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but to all who long to see him appear” (2 Tim 4:7-8).

This is the greatest battle, both for those who hear the Word preached, as well as for those who preach it. It is the battle of believing the words of Jesus and not falling away. It’s the battle against your own doubting and dying flesh, which won’t believe any of it. But it’s a noble battle. It’s the best battle. That’s why St. Paul calls it the good fight.

It’s easy for the lambs of Christ to get offended by his words and turn against him. This happens to the simple Christians who are led astray by wicked ministers and false teachers. It also happens to preachers who start off strong and faithful but lose hope in the words God gave them to proclaim. They long to be dressed in soft clothing and live comfortably, even if it is at the cost of turning away from the words of their Lord. A pastor gets tired of people not coming to hear him preach, and their apathy rubs off on him. He then relies on other tactics, gimmicks, or his own personality, rather than the simple and plain words of God. This only causes him to lose hope in the teaching that once gave him so much joy. A father grows tired of telling his grown children to live like Christians, stop fornicating, come to church, and live godly lives. They ignore him and even get annoyed with him when he brings it up. Their stubbornness eventually overcomes him, so he begins to excuse their immoral and godless behavior.

People are offended by Jesus. Perhaps it’s what he says about divorce and sexual sin. Or maybe it’s his insistence that you seek to be reconciled with the one who has hurt you or give generously to those who don’t deserve it. But why are these teachings of Jesus so offensive? They are offensive, because they don’t allow us to rest in our own righteousness and honor. Jesus Christ alone is our righteousness and honor. No matter how good and faithful you are at what you do, you aren’t thereby justified. Jesus teaches us to deny ourselves, pick up our cross, and follow him. He calls us to believe his words of eternal life and deny what our sinful hearts and this dying world tell us. Because it is only by his words that we stand justified in the sight of God the righteous Judge. This is why the cross of Jesus is a stumbling block, because we naturally rely on what our reason and strength want to rely on.

John and Paul both ended up in prison. They both ended up losing their heads. What kept them from falling away and giving up? Where did they look for their comfort and strength? It was not in themselves. It was not in their own virtues and strengths. It was only in the promise of their Lord Jesus. They were strengthened by the words of him who came into this world to save them from sin and condemnation.

We therefore all do well to follow these examples of faith. Pastors need to speak God’s Word clearly, call out sin for what it is, and apply the good news of the forgiveness of sins to troubled hearts. But consider this as well. Paul was encouraged by the faith of those whom he taught. John’s disciples told him about of the words and works of Christ. So pastors also need faithful parishioners to remind them of the good news, which they have been called to preach. Whether you are a father or mother, husband or wife, worker or employer, a pastor or a hearer, each should do what God has given him to do with the strength that God supplies. But our faith does not rest even in the strength to do what we are told. Our faith rests in the words of Jesus, who proclaims good news to the poor and humble heart. This is why he has come, and this is his ministry toward us. Amen.