

The Proof is in the Pudding

2 Corinthians 3: 1-5

As we have discussed in previous studies, Corinth was a difficult place in which to minister. The attacks on Paul were relentless. He was continually forced to defend his faith and calling in ministry. Some were determined to undermine his work and authority through any means necessary. While Paul did not enjoy the approval and acceptance of all men, he did rest in the call of God, being confident in his work through the guidance and power of the Spirit.

Our text reveals Paul, once again, defending his ministry with biblical principles, and yet these truths apply to every believer. Those who are committed to serving the Lord will face opposition. Eventually someone will question our motives and our credentials. How we handle such accusation will depend primarily on the source of our motivation and abilities. Society has developed a standard expectation that isn't necessarily in line with biblical mandates. One thing is certain – those who walk with the Lord will produce and portray fruit consistent with their calling. The world may not embrace us, but if we are walking according to the guidance of the Lord, we have all we need, regardless of their approval or lack thereof.

I want to consider the [manifestations](#) of ministry discussed by Paul as we think on the old phrase: [The Proof is in the Pudding](#).

I. A Word regarding Affirmation (1) – [Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?](#) Paul speaks of the commendation often expected in his day. This expectation has changed little in our day. In this we discover:

A. The Desire – Bear in mind that Paul had spent some eighteen months among the church in Corinth. Many there knew him well, and were very familiar with his approach to ministry. Yet the attacks continued. It is apparent that some were not satisfied with Paul's credentials in ministry. The success of the ministry had not proven an effective means of satisfying those who sought to discredit his ministry. Paul challenged the Corinthian church to consider the superfluous need of letters of recommendation, following an intimate knowledge of Paul. Was it really necessary for him to acquire and send further confirmation of his credentials? What good would it do to commend himself to them? Was it necessary for someone to write a letter of commendation for the church to Paul? What would any of that profit? Paul knew this was unnecessary, and yet some were not satisfied with his credentials. They demanded more proof.

- We are separated in time by thousands of years, and yet these desires remain today. It may be the result of jealousy, spite, or a lack of wisdom, but many still demand such affirmation. Many have a set of requirements and expectations that must be met before they will be satisfied with one's work in ministry. Now, listen closely – I am not opposed to a man getting a theological education to aid him in ministry. I am convinced we need to do all we can to equip ourselves for the work God has given us. However, having the right education from the right school does not, and cannot exceed the call of God and equipping of the Spirit. I fear many churches and ministries miss the man God has for them simply because his résumé doesn't meet their requirements. The same is true for lay people who desire to serve the Lord. Often we place more emphasis on the opinions of others than the leading of the Spirit.

B. The Danger (1) – Paul was certain of God's call on his life, and he had a heart for the church at Corinth. Clearly God was active and working in Paul's life and ministry. It would be tragic for such a union, orchestrated of God, to be hindered because some were not satisfied with Paul's résumé. The church could possibly lead according to the desires of men rather than those of the Lord.

- As we will discuss, Paul had and would continue to affirm his credentials through his ministry among the church. Such letters of recommendation were unnecessary at this point. I would never recommend anyone to a position of leadership or service without proper examination, but I am convinced that we must follow the guidance of the Lord instead of the expectations of society. Seminary degrees are great, and they serve to prepare one for ministry, but they do not automatically reveal the call of God or His touch upon an individual's life. When we seek the recommendations of men over the will of God, we are setting ourselves up for trouble. We then depend on the affirmation of men instead of the clear, convincing call of God.

II. A Word regarding Confirmation (2-3) – In an effort to put this debate to rest, Paul revealed the church itself stood as confirmation of his ministry. These truths continue to apply today. Consider:

A. Their Public Testimony (2) – *Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men.* Instead of unnecessary and unprofitable letters of recommendation, Paul had proof of his effectiveness in ministry. The church was growing and vibrant. They were living out their faith, sharing the Gospel of Christ, and others were noticing. Paul may not have had the credentials his accusers desired, but he had something far better – believers who were committed to the faith, making an impact on the community around them. The proof was in the pudding!

- Some may demand certain credentials on a professionally prepared résumé, but those who are perishing in sin could care less. They want to see those who are genuine in their faith and concerned about the needs of those around them. I could have more degrees than a thermometer, but if I lacked compassion and concern for others, what would that profit our community? They may look good hanging on the wall, but they are not reaching people for the Lord. The testimony of those I serve, and your interaction with our community, confirm my effectiveness as a leader more than any résumé ever could.

B. Their Personal Transformation (3) – *Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.* Paul decided to let his accusers say what they would; he knew the truth. He didn't have documents written with ink to brag about, but he had led others to Christ, resulting in their salvation. His letters were not of ink and paper, but letters of salvation written by the Holy Spirit within the hearts of those who believed. Those who attacked Paul could say what they pleased, but they could not argue with changed lives. The proof was in the pudding!

- This is likely the greatest measure of any ministry's effectiveness. I am not so much interested in our reputation among others, whether we meet their standards for ministry or not, but whether we are reaching people. They can say what they will about our credentials and our approach, but they cannot argue with transformed lives!

III. A Word regarding Qualification (4-5) – Finally Paul addressed his qualification for ministry, as well as all who strive to serve the Lord. Consider:

A. The Origination (4) – *And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward.* Paul affirmed his standing with the Lord and qualification for ministry originated in Christ. First and foremost Paul had been saved by grace. He was no longer the man he used to be. He had experienced a radical transformation in Christ. Following his conversion, Paul was called of God to preach the Gospel. All that he was at that moment, or ever hoped to be, was settled in Christ.

- This fundamental truth has not changed and it never will. In order to be effective in ministry, one must know Christ. We could have the finest education known to man, and be endorsed by those who carry a lot of influence, but apart from Christ we have no standing or authority. We cannot share something we have never experienced. A firsthand knowledge of the Gospel, through salvation in Christ, is foundational to ministry. When I was questioned regarding my call and qualifications for ministry, the first thing I was asked to do was share my salvation experience. Those men knew I must be sure of my salvation in order to preach the Gospel.

B. The Observation (4) – *And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward.* Paul understood an interesting and convicting aspect of ministry – it was God-ward. He knew he not only served God, but he served before God. Every aspect of his ministry was observed by the all seeing eye of God. Paul was not concerned with pleasing those who demanded more credentials; he was determined to please the One who called him and closely watched his life. He was committed to pleasing God rather than men.

- That is humbling, and yet it is also encouraging. While God does see and know every aspect of my ministry, I also take comfort knowing I serve an audience of one. I want to be effective in reaching others, making an impact on individual lives, but my goal is not to please men. I am obligated to please the Lord, and Him alone. If others are satisfied with that effort, great; if not, they will have to take it up with the Lord. Our primary obligation is to honor the Lord and follow His direction for our lives!

C. The Ordination (5) – *Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.* Paul knew his life and ministry were ordained of God and not of men. His ability was not dependent upon his personal effort or the approval of men. His sufficiency was in God and Him alone.

- We would do well to remember our dependence on the Lord. In, and of myself, I can do nothing. I am totally dependent upon the Lord to meet my needs and provide the resources necessary for ministry. I could have the favor of all men, and yet be lacking were it not for the Lord. Our value in life is not measured by the approval or praise of men. Those in Christ are known of Him, and He will provide for us as we strive to serve Him. *John 15:4-5 – Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. ^[5] I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

Conclusion: I am thankful for every blessing the Lord has provided and for the opportunities I have experienced. The Lord has allowed me to spend time under the teaching of great men of God. I do not take that lightly, but I am also reminded that our standing is not dependent upon our accomplishments or the approval of others. We must have a personal relationship with Christ through salvation. He calls and equips us according to His divine pleasure. You may not enjoy the approval of men, but if God has called you to engage in a particular work for Him, He will provide the resources you need to complete the task. Look to Him and lean upon Him for wisdom and strength.

If you are unsaved, yet to come to Christ by faith, I urge you to respond to the call of salvation. Serving the Lord is not a vocation we choose, but one God calls us to and equips us to perform. Service to the Lord requires salvation. Come as the Lord leads you.