

Introduction

February 23. We had 50 people at church. We had many university students. We celebrated the Lord's Supper. We passed the offering plates around. We sang and enjoyed the music. We shook hands and hugged each other. We sat around tables only a few feet apart in Bible study. We had coffee hour the prior Sunday and a downtown coffee and cocktails outing the next day. Then it all went away. Everything got shut down. No more worship in our church building. No Lord's Supper. No singing and no music. No Easter breakfast. No good byes to the UM seniors. No shaking hands, no hugging, no sitting next to each other. No coffee hour and no fellowship time downtown. No seeing each other in the flesh. Only social distancing and social isolation, Zoom calls and worship livestreams. You don't know what you have until it's taken away from you. No one expected the coronavirus to have the impact it did. It helps to put things into perspective; you can't take anything for granted. You appreciate the present, because tomorrow it could all be gone. Today the apostle Paul says something similar in the Second Lesson. He opens his heart to plead with you in raw emotional terms. Do not take for granted spiritual opportunities, because tomorrow it could all be gone!

Live Like There's No Tomorrow!

to take God's grace seriously ... to take God's ministry seriously

To Take God's Grace Seriously

Paul invested an entire year and a half of his life to found a church in Corinth. He put up with opposition, attacks, court cases, and riots, so he could proclaim God's grace to them. Once he left, it seemed to all fall apart. The last thing he wants is for all this to be in vain.

So Paul urges them, "Take God's grace seriously!" ***We urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.*** God's grace is his undeserved love for us, shown in Jesus Christ our Savior, who lived, died, and rose for you. There is nothing you can do to earn that; it's a gift you simply receive. However, as God places that gift in your hand, sinful humanity has this horrendous ability to throw that gift out the window, "No thank you!" Simply put, the Corinthians are in danger of squandering God's grace, and the fault would lie squarely with them, not God. Paul supports his appeal by quoting Isaiah 49. ***For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you."*** In Isaiah, this is a song by the Lord's servant, the Messiah, who feels like all his work is in vain, but the Lord has not forgotten about him. The Lord promises him that he would be the light to bring salvation to the ends of the world. Just as the exiles would be brought back to their homeland after deportation to Babylon, so Jesus would bring God's people back from all over the world – Jew and Gentile. In 2 Corinthians Paul makes two applications. First, he applies what originally refers to the Messiah to Christians more broadly. Second, he notes a shift in the timing. ***I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.*** By definition, Isaiah's prophecy looked forward to something in the future. Paul, however, is adamant that the time for prophecy that looks to tomorrow is past; now Christ has ushered in a grand era of fulfillment today. So live like there's no tomorrow! Take God's grace seriously today!

In the years right before Christ was born, the Roman poet Horace lived. In Book 1 of his *Odes*, he famously wrote, "Carpe diem!" As Robert Williams said in *Dead Poets Society*, "Carpe

diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your life extraordinary.” In other words, do everything you can right now to make things happen. Other scholars have argued that Horace was actually talking about plants and meant something more like “enjoy the present moment.” In other words, take time to smell the flowers.¹ Regardless, we can apply the basic premise to our Christian lives: take seriously the present opportunity you have today.

Yet so many are living like tomorrow will come as sure as the sun will rise. Some rationalize, “I won’t watch sermons online, come to church, have family devotions; I won’t do anything for my faith. We need to wait until this storm of uncertainty passes. Once things get back to normal, I’ll take things seriously again.” Do you not think the devil loves to hear that? Do you not think he will do everything he possibly can to slowly but surely eat away at your faith in the meantime? Do you not think that he will work hard to turn that attitude into a new habit that will last far longer than you originally anticipated? We originally anticipated we could resume worship by Easter, but the pandemic lasted longer than we wanted, and there is a high probability it will permanently adjust facets of our lives. The reason we can think like that is our culture’s sinful procrastination, “There will be always more time in the future. Put off to tomorrow what could be done today. That certainly includes religion.” But who are you to think your life will forever go on? Some people are now dying far sooner than they ever thought. What then? The horrendous tragedy would be to squander the grace God is showing you today.

Now is the time of God’s favor! Now is the day of salvation! God has dramatically gone into action at the climax of all history. Jesus took your salvation so seriously that no amount of procrastination would ever get in his way from going to the cross for you. No temptation would get him to put off to tomorrow what he was to do for you today. He put you to the front of his priority list, when he died to wash away all your sinful excuses and procrastination and to earn for you a ticket to heaven. That “now” of God’s salvation is every single day of your life. God has given you a time of grace to believe God’s gracious salvation, but one day it will come to an end. So I urge you: don’t squander it; don’t push it off. Open your hearts to hold firmly to the fact that God did this all for you. There is no more important message than that. Live like there’s no tomorrow to take God’s grace seriously!

To Take God’s Ministry Seriously

Once Paul left Corinth, the Corinthian congregation threatened to implode on itself. The so-called super apostles came in to undermine Paul’s abilities and credentials as an apostle. If you read through the letters he sent to this church, it quickly becomes apparent that Corinth is one of his most problematic churches. The last thing Paul wanted was for everything to be in vain.

So Paul appeals to the Corinthians, “Take God’s ministry seriously!” *As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way.* Paul’s ultimately concerned with God’s ministry. He is not out to promote himself but to demonstrate himself as God’s servant. Any unjustified attack by these super apostles would threaten to discredit the whole ministry. What follows is a rare case where Paul goes to such lengths to legitimize God’s ministry. First, he describes the manner of ministry: *in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness.* Paul endured much more hardship than we have recorded in the book of Acts. Just in that book, he was illegally beaten and imprisoned in Philippi and faced riots in

¹ See Chi Luu, “How ‘Carpe Diem’ Got Lost in Translation,” *JSTOR Daily*, 7 August 2019, accessed from <https://daily.jstor.org/how-carpe-diem-got-lost-in-translation/>.

Thessalonica and Ephesus. He could have grown bitter and vindictive, but he rose about that to have a ministry of patience and kindness. Second, he describes the circumstances of ministry: ***with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report.*** Weapons in the right and left refer to a sword in your right hand and a shield in your left, in other words, offense and defense. He went through the highs and lows of slander and good reports that he needed both offense and defense. Third, he describes the perceptions and reality of ministry: ***genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*** In each phrase, one word refers to what people would perceive ministry to be on the surface; the other refers to the deeper spiritual reality. People thought Paul was a no-name person, an impostor apostle, who has nothing going for him. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul took ministry so seriously he put everything into it. He then appeals to the Corinthians to reciprocate. ***We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also.*** This is one of the most moving appeals in all the New Testament, filled with emotion and pathos. Paul is placing it all on the line in pouring his heart out to the Corinthians. The problem has not been with us apostles; it's been with you Corinthians. We have not withheld our affection, but you have. **I plead with you, reciprocate your affections to take God's ministry as seriously as we do.**

A few days ago I took Charlotte to get the mail. It's not very far, but it took awhile. She likes to wander around – sometimes into the street. So an enjoyable stroll quickly turned into a serious talk. “Sidewalks are for Charlotte; roads are for cars. You could get hurt by a car very badly, and Mama and Dada care for you so much they don't want you to get hurt.” It may be a bit over the top; after all, people walk their dogs in our quiet street all the time. But parents don't take chances, because they have opened wide their hearts and not withheld affections from their children. This is how seriously to take ministry, as if you are pleading with your only child not to walk into the road where she could get hit by a car.

I am careful in how I will talk right now, because ministry isn't about *my* ministry as the pastor of this church; it's about *our* ministry together as members of this church. It may be a bit over the top, but here it goes. I love ministry and pour my heart and soul in it. If that does not ever show, then I am sorry and I sincerely ask you to talk to me about it. At the risk of sounding a bit too emotional like Paul, I nonetheless give you a challenge today: take ministry as seriously as I do. Take worship, take Bible study, take community outreach, take inactive members, take the health and future of this church as seriously as I do. **Open your hearts to reciprocate your affections to me. Live like there's no tomorrow to take ministry seriously!**

Conclusion

I have no idea what tomorrow will bring. I don't know if we will need to close down in-person worship again. I don't know how long we will be able to see each other's masked faces, or celebrate the Lord's Supper together, or do the things the church does. One of my fears throughout this pandemic is that people will start to get used to – and enjoy – churches that are closed down, such that they take church less seriously. Don't let that happen. Don't miss out on the opportunity we have now. Live like there's no tomorrow, because now is the time of God's salvation! Amen.

Introduction

I'm going to cut right to the chase: how well do you get along with me? It's a pretty bold statement to begin any conversation. Your teachers don't ask students that question on the first day of class. Your bosses don't go around poking their heads into every office and cubicle asking that question. Your family members don't pull people aside at a busy summer family reunion to ask that question. Do you like me? Not like me? Put up with me on Sundays but then go home? Like coming over to my house for a congregation get-together? Like inviting me over to your house during the week? All are questions that seem off-limits to our cultural sensibilities.

The very premise of me asking that question seems to smack of meddling into your personal relationships, intruding into sensitive subjects without any communicative decency, or a messiah complex of a narcissistic leader who needs his followers to constantly complement him. The problem is that in the church we're a community of people united around Jesus and each other; we're stronger together than alone. The problem is that if problems fester in a congregation, that impacts more than you and me; it impacts everyone. The biggest problem is that our text for today, Hebrews 13, feels no shame about going right to the heart of the relationship between spiritual leaders and Christians in a congregation. Like last week where I opened up about God's pastoral evaluation for me, today is another sensitive, difficult sermon to give to you, but to be faithful to God's Word today, we simply need to ask the question:

How Well Do You Get Along with Your Pastor?

What God Asks of Me ... What God Asks of You

What God Asks of Me

I'm going to go first in considering what God asks of me. We don't know exactly who the author of this letter to the Hebrews is, but he clearly must have been known to this congregation of believers and had a close relationship with them because he wanted to come back soon. It was written to Jewish Christians likely living in the capital of Rome, who were undergoing persecution and tempted to go back to their former way of life in Judaism, which was protected by Roman law. During this difficult time, they could think back to their leaders in the past. It seems these leaders were the ones to first speak God's Word to these Christians but had now died, perhaps even because of persecution. Yet no matter who came and went, their message of Jesus, who's the same yesterday, today, and forever, never did change.

God asks me to do three things that makes what I do different from a boss, a CEO, the chair of a board of directors, or a dictator. First, just like those founding leaders of this congregation, God asks me to speak God's Word to the people he has given me. **Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.** I'm not dealing so much with financial books, organizational structure, or business development but with God's inspired Word. It comes from God, not from my opinions or ideas. That's why this is so important. Second, he asks me to be an example to the flock. **Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.** These former leaders who had passed into heaven's glory were so memorable because of the lives they lived. God cannot ask the congregation to imitate the life and faith of its leaders if God does not first ask me to lead an exemplary life. So I can't honestly say what I will say in the

second half of this sermon if I'm not prepared to put God's Word into action in my own life. Finally, God asks me to look after this congregation because he will require an account from me. ***They keep watch over you as those who must give an account.*** A more literal translation would be "they look after *your souls*." God asks me to be so vigilant and alert for your spiritual welfare that I am prepared to lose sleep over it, and I have. While I report to you, our church council, other pastors, and our synod, most importantly I report straight to Jesus. I will have to stand before him on the Last Day, and he will call me to account. "Did you faithfully study my inspired Word so you could have a clear, scholarly understanding of it on the basis of its original languages, or were you simply too busy or lazy to do so? Did you faithfully proclaim it in your sermons, or were you too worried about it being too difficult for American culture to accept? Did you visit those people who were drifting from the fold, or did you just give up after they blew you off the first time? Did you love those who were living together enough to confront them, or did you just sweep it under the rug? Did you convict people of their idolatry against me and lavish on them the beauty of my forgiveness, or did you just resort to trite theological phrases you've used many times before? Did you exemplify servant leadership, or did you just want to be a dictator? Did you show compassion to the people of your community, or did you spend all your time hanging out with your friends in your congregation? Did you care for the people of Redeemer in Ann Arbor, MI, the people I died for and bought with my blood, the best you possibly could?" All those responsibilities I take very seriously, and that is exactly what is going through my mind as I make difficult decisions and do things I am hesitant to do.

For a congregation and its leaders to get along well, it goes both ways. If all I want to happen is for this congregation to benefit me, then I have no excuse if there's conflict. I'm selfishly serving myself and not you. We all have a responsibility to each other: I have a responsibility to spiritually care for you as if my life depended on it, and you have a responsibility to respect and pray for the spiritual leaders God has given to you.

What God Asks of You

I'm asking you to go next in considering what God asks of you. The first two verses remind these Hebrew Christians of the godly lives of the leaders who first brought them God's Word and have passed away; the latter verses transition to their current spiritual leaders who are living and serving them now. Just like God asks me for three specific things, he asks you for three specific things. What follows is difficult for me to say openly to you. I don't do so out of a narcissistic attitude that needs attention, but simply because these passages are in God's Word and we can't avoid them. So I trust you enough to say exactly what God says to you.

First, imitate the lives of godly spiritual leaders who have come before you. ***Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.*** This could be the pastor who baptized and confirmed you and now has passed away. It could be Redeemer's previous pastors. It could be your own parents or grandparents, or the Christian friend who first invited you to church. As we look back on their lives, their greatest legacy is what they passed on to you: the message of Jesus as your Savior. The greatest tribute we could do is not worship them like we worship Jesus but remember the great ways Jesus poured his love into their lives and emulate the ways it was shared with us. Second, respect and honor me as your pastor who is currently serving you. ***Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.*** I know full well submission to authority grinds against our twenty-first century sensibilities and our love for personal freedom. This verse does not mean you need to be a doormat or can never passionately disagree with me.

However, just like was true for me, if all you want to do is see this congregation benefit you, then there's no excuse if there is conflict. You're serving yourself, not me, not this congregation, and not Jesus. In contrast to many other church bodies whose search committees hire their pastors, the beauty of our call process is that I can honestly say it was not my idea to come here. On Call Day, I had no clue where I would be sent. I did not know anything about Redeemer in Ann Arbor, MI, other than that my brother really wanted to visit for football games. I am not your spiritual leader because I chose this. This verse means you recognize who placed me here, the Lord of the Church, and you honor me as his representative. Finally, pray for me. ***Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.*** I need your prayers, and I need them often. It's fine if you tell me a sermon or Bible study really impacted you, but more important is that you tell me you're praying for me. Pray that I stay faithful to God's Word, that I never lose my passion for studying it, that I have the resilience to endure rejection, that I grow in my ability to preach and teach it, that I go out and share it, and that I find joy in my ministry here.

Conclusion

I work hard to develop authentic friendships so that I can legitimately call you friends and you can call me a friend. So I don't really care what you call me. I'm glad "Reverend" has passed out of common conversational English. I don't care if you call me by my first name, my last name, or my title Pastor. What I do want you to do is remember that "pastor" means "shepherd" and envision this scene. One shepherd looked out over the barren hills and saw all his sheep scattered. So he dropped everything and ran after them. He endured the scorching sun, blistering heat, and dusty paths. When the ravenous wolves came to attack them, he went out to tackle them away. He was not afraid to shed his blood and risk his life for his sheep, nor did he ever tire of leading them and guiding them. That Great Shepherd is the only reason pastors and congregations can get along today. ***Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.***