

Open heart surgery

2 Corinthians 6

Hugh Latimer was a bishop under King Henry VIII in the sixteenth century. And as we know you wanted to be on side with king Henry VIII. He was the sort of guy who didn't mind separating heads from bodies. If he didn't like what you said or did.

And there's an account of Hugh Latimer of when he was called to preach in the presence of the king. What he said in his sermon. The king didn't like much. So the King called him back the following week to preach again. Here's how the account goes.

Upon a certain occasion, when preaching before Henry, Hugh, as was his wont, spake his mind very plainly, and the sermon displeased his majesty; he was therefore commanded to preach again on the next Sabbath, and to make an apology for the offense he had given. After reading his text, the bishop thus began his sermon:—"Hugh Latimer, dost thou know before whom thou art this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away thy life if thou offendest; therefore take heed that thou speakest not a word that may displease!

But then consider well, Hugh, dost thou not know from whence thou comest; upon whose message thou art sent? Even by the great and mighty God! who is all

present! and who beholdeth all thy ways! and who is able to cast thy soul into hell! Therefore, take care that thou deliverest thy message faithfully." He then proceeded with the same sermon he had preached the preceding Sabbath, but with considerably more energy. The sermon ended, the court were full of expectation to know what would be the fate of this honest and plain-dealing bishop. After dinner, the king called for Latimer, and with a stern countenance asked him how he durst preach in such a manner. He, falling on his knees, replied, his duty to his God and his prince had enforced him thereto, and that he had merely discharged his duty and cleared his conscience by what he had spoken. Upon which the king, rising from his seat, and taking the good man by the hand, embraced him, saying, "Blessed be God, I have so honest a servant."

It's a great story isn't it. I guess it's always great to see someone sticking it to the king. But it's more than that isn't it.

Here's someone who's a shining example of what it is to follow Jesus.

Here's someone who stands in the line of Paul who says I believe and therefore speak.

Who embodies the life of Jesus and the things Paul's been saying

Who lives by faith and not just by sight. Who fears God more than men. Who's compelled to speak the truth. At cost to himself. In spite of the kind of things in Paul's list of hardships here in chapter 6.

And he's not just an example of someone with a big brain. Someone with a lot of knowledge. Or a model of sound doctrine. It's an example of someone with a big heart isn't it.

It's become a bit of a cliché at least with footy commentators. He's got a heart as big as Phar Lap they say. And they're talking about the guy who's given everything for his team. His heart his soul his strength. Everything he's got. He's put it all on the line. He's spent all his strength on the field.

And here in chapter six Paul makes an appeal to the Corinthians. And it's an appeal of the heart. You can read it there at the end of the his list of hardships. From verse 11. And he's like a dad speaking to his kids he says

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.

And you might think that sounds a bit DAYS OF OUR LIVES. You might say is this really the great Paul the theologian? Talking about affection? Really?

But following Jesus has always been a matter of the heart hasn't it. You might have been to church services where that didn't seem to be the case. And if you have, that's a pretty sad indictment. But it's always been the case.

Deuteronomy 6:5-6 ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.

Jesus says it too. Love God and love your neighbor. This sums up the whole law.

And Israel's failure is a heart failure. They went after other things. Their hearts desire turned away from God. Jesus summed it up in two words. He described Israel as having Hard hearts.

And now Paul points to the church in Corinth that's turning away from him. That's turning aside from his teaching. And his Jesus. And his lifestyle. And he says. We've got a problem here. And it's cardio vascular..... It's a heart problem.

Now from the outset the gospel cuts to the heart. It's not a shallow message. That's why people get so offended. You've got to accept you've got a sinful heart.

And as you're being transformed..... you're trying to get rid of those old sinful heart attitudes. Selfishness. Wrong desires. All those kind of things. That are going to be great big roadblocks to other people turning to Jesus.

And of course the other side of the coin is, apart from your wrong attitudes.

There's everyone else as well. You're not just a perpetrator of sin, you're also a victim of it.

You're a victim of other people's selfishness. You're a victim of OTHER PEOPLE'S thoughtlessness and OTHER PEOPLE'S bad attitudes.

So the normal sort of thing to do. The instinctive thing...is you protect yourself. You protect your heart. You put up walls. Someone hurts you. You put up a wall. You have a bad experience. You put up another one. And you avoid people. Or you hit back at them. Or you harbor your bitter thoughts. By the time you're an adult you've got so many protective barriers around yourself. You're like a 16th century knight in armour. And you can't move. You've got so much bitterness. You're hard to get on with. You're not really honest with anyone. Maybe not even your family. Maybe not even yourself.

But Paul says, when you're in Christ, all that has to change. You're a new creation in Christ. The old has gone.

Which means you're called to be like Jesus.

Which means you're called to be like Paul, who's like Jesus.

Which is very, very scary. Which is so counter instinctive....

If you look down the list Paul's got there for us.

It's scary, but it's also what sets Christian ministry apart. And it's what God uses so powerfully to clear the way for people.

Paul says we put no stumbling block in people's way. Like others who are saying you can be a trouble free Christian. Like others who are saying it's money money money. Christianity abba style. Or It's health all the way. It's living the dream. That just so happens to look not much different from anyone else's dream. In terms of lifestyle. In terms of sacrifice.

Funny isn't it. He says we commend ourselves to you BECAUSE WE'VE copped exactly the same sort of things JESUS DID

Lets run down the page from verse 3

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way; in great endurance.

And you can actually split this list off into different types of things.

The first few there are the sort of general difficulties he faces. Troubles, hardships and distresses. I'm guessing things like travel plans and shipwrecks, and travelling at night to avoid the bad guys. Bad news that sort of thing. Frustrations.

And Paul's opponents play that stuff down. But Paul says we endure it.

Then there's the stuff people do to you directly. Which Paul had his fair share of. Beatings and imprisonments and riots.

Which he endures, which he doesn't shy away from, which is evidence of his commitment.

Then there's the things of his own doing. HARD WORK, sleepless nights and hunger.

We've seen it in the book of Acts. The way the genuine apostles follow along in the footsteps of Jesus, and get treated exactly the same. But they keep going. Cause they're preaching the word of life. And they want people to hear it.

So they ENDURE.

And not only that, he's GODLY in the meantime. See what Paul's like in the middle of all that? Verse 6. This is the next little group. And it's THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT. It's the POWER OF GOD that makes him like this. Cause I can tell you, it certainly isn't natural. He's beaten and thrown in prison, he's cold and he's hungry; he hasn't had a decent night's sleep for months. But at the same time, he's committed to PURITY. And UNDERSTANDING. And PATIENCE. Now with me..... they're the FIRST THINGS to go. And KINDNESS. With the help of the Holy Spirit he's facing this stuff with SINCERE LOVE, he says there in verse 7, and with TRUTHFUL SPEECH.

Which are all the things that God uses as weapons. Paul calls them the weapons of righteousness. These are the BIG GUNS. Don't try to take shortcuts. God's weapons are purity. And patience. And kindness. And honesty. You might feel like you get walked over sometimes, but keep at it. Because those are the weapons of God. And Paul's stuck with it. Even when things haven't seemed fair.

He's kept his integrity. Even when he's been accused of being a phoney. Even when his integrity's been unfairly questioned. Which is tough. But Paul's been through the lot, and he's still being Godly. Read from verse 8. Through glory and dishonour. Bad report and good report. Even though he's been genuine, he's been

regarded as an imposter. Even though they've known him, they're pretending they don't - known yet regarded as unknown; dying, let we live on - he's poured out everything he's got, but he keeps going; beaten, he says, but not killed, sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich, having nothing, yet possessing everything.

That's the picture of the genuine apostle. That's CHRISTIAN MINISTRY. And the Corinthians have decided they don't want to know him.

And they're not on their own are they? In a way. Every single one of us wants to run a mile from that sort of list. And our ears are wide open to the more comfortable, the more attractive options. Which lets face it are more about me, than about Jesus.

And Paul's challenge is a great one. He says stop withholding. If that's you. As a fair exchange. Stop putting roadblocks in the way for people by doing it YOUR WAY. Or the way that sounds best for you. It's not a head issue. Not that you don't understand. It's a heart issue. Open your hearts. Paul says.

Will you have troubles a bit like Paul. Yes

General sorts of troubles. Yes. Troubles from people. Yes. Will it be hard work? Yes.

Lose some sleep. Yes.

But with God's power you'll be a kind of a weapon in his hands. As you demonstrate kindness, and patience and sincerity. With his help.

No matter what they say about you.

There's a great little repeated word in the last little bit of Paul's list here. The word but, or yet.

Dying Paul says. But we live on.

Beaten, but not killed.

Sorrowful, but always rejoicing, poor, but making many rich

Having nothing but possessing everything.

At the end of the list. Paul reckons it's more than worth it.

And he says to the Corinthians. That's what you saw in us. And it was so powerful. We didn't withhold from you. But you're withholding. So open yourselves up. Stop withholding. It's a fair exchange.

See, the trouble with the Corinthians is, THEY'LL TRY ANYTHING. You name it, they'll try it. But when you've found the truth of the gospel, there's no other truth to find. So stick with it.

There's that little book that's come out. It's called the PRAYER OF JABEZ. All about a bloke in the Old Testament who prayed; and God made him prosper. So the book says, if you pray that same prayer EVERY DAY FOR 30 days - everything that's

wrong will come RIGHT. Your business. Your family. Your relationships. The SECRET OF FINDING GOD'S BLESSING.

Let me tell you, if you've put your trust in Jesus, the path behind him might be tough. But there's NOTHING ELSE YOU NEED. There's nowhere else to look.

But the Corinthians throw themselves at whatever else comes by. Prostituting themselves. With terrible consequences.

Which is why Paul has to say what he says in verses 14 to 18. He says BE CAREFUL WHO YOU JOIN UP WITH.

It's a picture of a bullock team. Unevenly matched. Unequally yoked. One pulling all the weight, the other pulling backwards.

And often you'll hear people applying it to marriage. Or going into a business partnership. Don't do it. Unless the other person's a Christian.

Which is good advice. Because if you're a Christian married to someone who's not, you'll know that it's tough. And Paul says back in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 if you're already in that situation you need to stay as you are. But if you're choosing a partner now or if down the track you're going to be, THEN CHOSE A CHRISTIAN. And don't be tempted otherwise. And I know that almost every Christian I know who's walked into that situation, they'd want me to say to you if you've got the choice, DON'T DO IT.

Now having said that, can I also say I don't think Paul's exactly talking about MARRIAGE here. It's the same principle. And it still applies. But he's talking about something else, isn't he?

I mean, if you're looking at your bible there, take away the gap between verse 13 and 14 and take away the little heading they've put there in the NIV bibles, and you can see it runs straight on.

And it seems to me in the face of what he's saying about true and false apostles, and the fact these Corinthians are looking for something new, it's a very specific warning to them. To be very, very careful as Christians that these new things they're pursuing aren't actually going to lead them somewhere they don't expect. Because it's quite possible that new teachings that sound spiritual are actually deceptions of the devil himself.

Now, that might sound harsh. But when you get to chapter 11 you'll see that's exactly Paul's warning. That if the devil's going to deceive you, he's not likely to turn up in a red suit and horns. He's more likely to dangle a carrot. A new sort of Christianity. A so-called Christianity that's focussed on THIS WORLD. Instead of Jesus. A so-called Christianity that's ever so subtly different. That tells you about the CHRIST FORCE WITHIN YOU, instead of the Christ who rules all of creation. That tells you about the victories YOU CAN WIN. Instead of the victory JESUS HAS WON ON THE CROSS. That baptizes all kinds of immorality...and calls it freedom. That tells you about the SECRET PRAYER OF JABEZ and things are going to be easy. Instead of the NARROW ROAD where things are going to be tough. And so often it

sounds so good. That you don't even realise you're not looking at Jesus anymore. You're just looking at YOU.

Paul says to us here in chapter 6, BE CAREFUL. On one hand you need to open yourselves up. But not to stuff like this. Don't yoke yourselves with people like that. Don't tie yourself to false teaching and a false gospel because it's the work of the devil. And what do righteousness and wickedness have in common. Absolutely nothing. What harmony is there between Christ and Belial, he says. Belial is the Hebrew word for WORTHLESSNESS. And that was one of their names for the devil. The worthless one. Don't tie yourselves to something worthless.

Paul says here in chapter 7 verse 1, because we've got these promises of God, because we've got the GOSPEL, then we need to purify ourselves. From everything that contaminates body and spirit. That we need to get serious about living holy lives. Avoiding the rubbish that's offered by those false gospels. Be closed to that.

Be open to God in the gospel. Be open to others as you do the tough stuff of walking in Jesus' steps.
