

We're not going to be having a show this year (a lot of things, we can't do). But over the years, I've put in many entries in all sorts of different fields, in the local show.

- *Leatherwork;*
- *Fleeces of wool;*
- *vegetables;*
- *eggs;*
- *I even put a sheep dog in once;*
- *cooking*
- *photography; and of course*
- *the obligatory school entries for neatness and 'works of art' (in my case, a rather 'loose' term)...*

*And sometimes I'd do OK & get a little card/ribbon... Most often, I **wouldn't** come 1st, 2nd, or 3rd. But sometimes I'd get a little certificate that said "Highly Commended" ...*

How do you take that???

*I think the way you're supposed to take it is: "That entry was really good – just compared to the other stuff – well, those other entries were exceptional. (But mine was still really good)." Or,,, more often,,, I'd take it as "It's not good enough" ... Those **other** entries, they're the best – my effort wasn't even 2nd best; or 3rd best... I wasn't good enough...*

It's a bit sad really... – to get a "Highly Commended", and be left feeling "I'm not good enough"...

But you know what??? To be commended by **God** – there's nothing better than that. You see, there is no first prize. There is no second prize – we're either commended or we're not...

I'm going to do things a bit back-to-front today. I'm going to **begin** today's message, with the closing punchline Vv 17&18:

17 "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." 18 For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

Isn't it wonderful, hey, to be approved by God – isn't that something? To be commended by:

- the Lord God Almighty;
- creator of Heaven and Earth;
- King of Kings & Lord of Lords;
- Judge of the universe & saviour of our souls...

You know, sometimes we compare ourselves to other Christians... I don't know if you do...; And You might believe that pastors are beyond that sort of vanity... We're not – at least, I'm not... And it's probably more obvious for me now, than ever before... All of a sudden, every church in the country has had to either stop doing services / preaching,, or go online...

I'm a preacher – I'm a pastor of a church, But when I get to hear a really, really good preacher / bible teacher, **I'm thankful for them and their ministry**, but then I compare myself, and I tell myself, "Well, they get the prize – they've got a special way – an amazing gift – I can't do what they do..."

And it can leave me feeling really “insignificant”. And here we are (because of the Covid-19 pandemic), setting up our online worship – and the online messages, And I’m wondering, “Do we really need to do it???” There is so much excellent quality stuff already available,, And we can’t keep up with their professional level of production **or** the renown of their preachers...

And so I compare myself and our little church, and I can feel “Totally inadequate”...

And this might be resonating with some of you... You try to compare yourself to super-Christians, and you just feel terribly inadequate..

But the thing is, I’m **wrong** to do that. I’m not **supposed** to try and compare myself to other servants of God. **They** are God’s servants, and **I** am God’s servant; and **you** are God’s servant. And God has deployed each of us in the place that He wants us to be...

And for all of us – for you as well, we’re not supposed to compare ourselves to other Christians and rate yourself on

- how good or bad you are; or
- how effective/ineffective;
- gifted/ungifted

The **Lord** calls us /equips/gifts to minister in the area of influence, that God has assigned to who? To us. And all we hope for, is that we are commended in the way that we fulfil this commission. There **is** no 1st, 2nd best, or 3rd best... **And** it’s not the one who commends themselves, who are the best –

it's the one whom the **Lord** commends... And you know what? To get a commendation from the Lord, that's the top prize...

Alright, so some of us feel that, compared to others, we're not good enough, or we're only 2nd best, or we don't make the grade...

But it works the other way too... Some people and some churches, are really good at promoting themselves above others... "Oh, our pastor – he's a really great preacher. Come to our church." Or; our church is the best church in town – You know what I'm talking about here: shameless self-promotion, aimed at sheep-stealing...

And we need to remember: ¹⁸ ... it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the **Lord** commends.

Righto:

I'm not really (at all) into social media. We purposely don't have Facebook in our house, and I'm not on twitter / Instagram, or any of the other things that I've never heard of... But I remember when those things first started getting going, businesses would offer prizes "Like us on Facebook to go into the draw for a prize". They'd do anything, to build their number of "Likes" ... Is that still a thing? I don't even know.

But I do understand that the more “Likes” a business achieves, the more likely people are to try them out, and to do business with them... And I think for some folk, churches are the same. The more likes, the better the church... And many, many churches today, all you’ve got to do, is look at their website, and it’ll have the banner, “Like us on Facebook”...

You know what??? I reckon if Paul was writing this today, he’d have something to say about that:

- **It’s not the one who commends himself, who is approved;**
- **it’s not the one who gets the most likes on Facebook; or**
- **it’s not the one who gets the most views on YouTube who is approved... ,**

but the one whom the Lord commends.

Now, what led Paul to write such a thing???

Well, I’m going to repeat what I said last week:

You’re probably sick of me saying this, but for any new listeners, I’ll say it again:

Paul planted the church in Corinth. But when he left that church, to go and plant some more churches in other places, some **false** apostles (from out of town), came into Corinth and staked **their** claim upon the church... And they brought false teaching into that church. And as part of their take-over coup, they tried to discredit the Apostle Paul, to take his power away from him.

And what's unfolding in this part of the letter, is Paul is exposing the character and the *modus operandi* (the method of operation) of the false apostles, and what they had done. And he's comparing the way **they** operate, to the way that he operates.

So, what the False Apostles had done, is they moved in, to take over, what God had been building through the ministry of the Apostle Paul... And they claimed it as their own – they claimed this seemingly thriving church, as their own success story,, which is what Paul is talking about when he says V¹⁵ **We do not boast beyond limit in the labours of others.**

Alright, the False Apostles were very proud of the Corinthian church – “It's **our** church, look at these wonderful people – look at the amazing spiritual gifts they have – this is as a result of our leadership...”

It was nothing of the sort.

And they were really undermining Paul's authority as an apostle. Here's an example: V¹⁰ For they say, “His **letters** are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.”

Alright, virtually what they were saying, is “*Paul seems all very impressive, when he writes his letters, but in person, he's weak*” ...

And Paul defends himself: “Look, unless you lot change your ways, I’m going to be pretty jolly tough when I come.” (my paraphrase)

But what Paul really draws out here, is it’s wrong, to compare ourselves to others. He says: **V¹² Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who **are** commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.**

And as far as Paul was concerned, those false apostles were trying to scrape together, some kind of evidence of God’s work, so that they could boast about it, even though it had been done by others... They were using it as evidence of how great and wonderful they were...

And Paul’s calling them out on this... It’s not them – it’s not leaders of a church who are to be praised – Anything good that happens in a church, is God’s doing...

And he introduces the concept of serving in the area of influence, that God has assigned. And this is what we’re going to focus on today: The concept of serving in the area of influence, that God has assigned...

I wonder, “Have we ever considered this?” God has assigned to each one of us, an area of influence...

Now, I’m not at all, talking about social media influencers – I’m really showing my age here, but apparently, some people

are just famous for being famous. And they build their social media profile, and have so many people following them, and will watch every video clip that they make, that corporations are even willing to pay them, to say something good about their product... and by doing that, more people want to buy it.

Social media influencers – not talking about that...

Ordinary people like you (or extraordinary people like you), & ordinary people like me, have been assigned, an area of influence, by God...

Now, for me, the gift that God has given me, is teaching... But he hasn't called me, to be a teacher at a Bible college (I'm not wired that way)... My whole life – my whole working career, has not been geared towards Academia... It has been geared towards Agriculture... So, is it any surprise, that God now has me using this gift of teaching (teaching the Word of God), primarily to Rural congregations??? It's no surprise at all, is it??? At least, not to me...

And God has been increasing this ministry... And I don't believe at all, that God is wanting Bush Disciples to take over other rural churches, because God has called **you**, to be the church where **you** are... That, is the area of influence, that God has assigned to you...

And if we here at Bush Disciples, can provide you a few resources, to help you to minister, in the area of influence that God has assigned to you, well, that's part of our ministry – to help you, to minister in the area of influence that God has given you.

I believe, one of the greatest dis-services to the Gospel, has been the professionalisation of ministry... In many places, the people of God have been deserting the local church, so that they can have a 'big church' experience (a mega-church)... And as the little congregations die, and the big congregations boom, **professionals** are employed to:

- do evangelism;
- the pastoral care;
- be responsible for the development of disciples;
- produce the music;
- and the media
- administration & management

And many people just go to church, to have church done to them... And in their eyes, compared to the 'experts' (the professionals), they feel they have no ministry (because we pay people to do that now)...

And I believe, that's one of the greatest dis-services to the Gospel... Because in Christ, we are **all** ministers. God has assigned to **every** believer, an area of influence. We each have a circle of contacts and relationships; and acquaintances, and God calls us, to minister to them..

But let's nail down this concept of ministering in an area of influence: Something I want to guard against here, is giving you the wrong message.

I've heard people preaching on "**Being** a person of influence", and the message that I've heard, frankly, wasn't Godly teaching – it was more about motivational speaking... Let me explain the difference. Motivational speaking, is about *"Improve yourself" – become someone really amazing, and then you'll be a person of influence... — Stand out from the crowd, and then other people will want to be just like you...*

And from a worldly perspective, that might be true... But in God's economy, it's a load of rubbish...

It was in Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians, that he said:

1 Corinthians 1:26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (what's he saying? Not many of you were very influential sorts of people) **27 But** (I love that word "But") God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; **28** God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, (WHY???) **29** so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. **30** And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, **31** so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Exactly what he said again in V17 of today's reading...

Alright, in God's economy, it's not about **becoming** a person of influence, and if you ever hear that preaching, I urge you, just reject it outright... That's the world's way – not God's way...

You see, we don't have to **become** a person of influence by improving ourselves. God has already put us – he's already put you – He's already put me, **in our area** of influence. What does that mean???

Well, that means it's not about **me** being great / you – it's about **God** being great. It's about God using the weak, for His glory; It's about God using the lowly and the despised for His glory... It's not about what I can do – it's about what God can do, **through** me, in **spite** of me / you.

Are you a young Mum, who goes to play groups? (obviously not now – but normally) Well, guess where your ministry is. What's the area of influence that God has assigned to you? Share Christ, and the Love of God, with the other mums (at playgroup)...

Are you a farmer? Who do you hang out with? Other farmers... Well, what's your area of influence? Who do you think, is the best person to share Christ with those other farmers??? No, not another Christian farmer. **You!!!...** When another farmer reveals to you, his pain or his heartache... be ready to respond with, "Can I pray with you?"

Do you see yourself as being on the fringe of respectable society, and maybe you don't feel like you really fit in the church – they're so middle class – you feel that they're on a

different level of society to what you are... Well, guess what your area of influence is. It's on that different level of society that you recognise as being absent from your church... You are a minister/evangelist to them.

You might be a Roo shooter; shearer; fencer...

Your area of influence – the place where you share the Gospel of Christ, / love of God / pray for those around you, is right there at the roo box; shearing shed; shearers quarters; fenceline...

If you're a school teacher, your area of influence is in the classroom; the playground; and the staff-room...

Do you hear what I'm saying? Where you are; in the work situation; or social circle where you fit, is your area of influence...

I get really frustrated, when the attitude gets taken, that "*I've got to go and do a mission trip, so that I can be involved in the mission of the church.*" – Now God **does** call some of us to overseas mission, but not all of us... I believe that often, it's aspiring to somebody else's area of influence, at the neglect of our own area of influence... We need to minister where God has put us. You need to minister in your area of influence, and I need to minister in my area of influence...

So, that brings us to today. At this point in world history, we are at a point of incredible change, in the Christian church.

With the unfolding pandemic (Covid-19) and the strict social isolation measures we're living with, there are a lot of hurting people out there, and some folk are really scared. Anxiety is rampant...

- for the very old, and for those who have chronic heart and lung problems, the death-rate is quite high (for those who are infected).
- And some are really afraid of this...
- In a culture where "health" and "long life" is almost taken for granted, for some people for the first time – they're considering their mortality...
- And people are lonely... For some people, you get to carry on in your job, not much is really changed... But for many people, by the letter of the law, they don't have a valid reason to leave home... And they're lonely.

And so in Australia today:

- Some people are scared;
- Lonely
- Asking, "Where is God in this?"
- Dying alone
- Grieving because they can't be by the side of a loved one as they die, or they're not allowed to go to their funeral;
- Some people are just sad, because it seems like the state has banned all fun and all social and family interaction (except for those in your own home)
- I won't be surprised if our state loses more people through suicide and domestic violence, than what we lose through the infection itself...

Friends, the mission field is enormous at this time...

But the church doors are closed... We've had to take up new ways of preaching the Gospel.

How can we be Christ's church, at this time of need... Well, what we're doing today is a start – connecting together with online worship...

I just read the other day in Revelation 14, in all of the mayhem and chaos (that's going to come at the end of time), there's a picture of an angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.

And we could use that as a metaphor, for what's happening now – we've taken the Gospel to the air-waves... And what is the Eternal Gospel that will be preached on that day? The Angel said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

The Gospel message in the time of disaster, and the Gospel message before the day of judgment, remains the same: **Fear God and give him glory ... and worship him**, who created everything.

But where do we fit into that? Where do you fit into that?
Where's your area of influence, that God has assigned you to minister in...

Get on the phone.

- Those who don't have many friends
- Lonely
- Take a meal to someone who's sick
- Ring and talk to those who are self-isolated

Let's be more connected now, than ever before...

The area of influence, that God has assigned to you, is limited only by the size of your contact list...

Let's be intentional, to catch up with people we wouldn't normally ring. And be intentional, to go deeper. Ask how they're going, be willing to go deeper than superficial niceties. And offer to pray with them, right there on the phone... 3 people I spoke with on the phone, all offered to pray for me. And it was wonderful...

And don't be afraid to pray (on the phone) for an unbeliever. And let's be witnesses for Jesus, and let's not be afraid of that eternal Gospel – Fear God and give Him glory...

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, at such a time as this,
It is right to both fear You, and to give You Glory.
You are the King of Kings;
You are the Lord of Lords;
You are the God who gives life;

And the one who takes it away;

You are the God who judges;
And the God who saves..
All Glory to You.

Lord, what a humbling thing it is,
To be assigned an area of influence, for us to minister in.
Lord, we know we are not capable of this.
We can't do it, but You can.

Holy Spirit, be with us,
as we phone and visit those who are in need.
Be in our conversation.
Give us a boldness and a confidence,
To take a conversation deeper,
and to pray with those in need.

And Lord, for some, this is a time of great fear and anxiety;
For others, not so much.
But Lord, we pray that this would be a time,
When we, Your church, would step up,
And minister in the area of influence,
That You have assigned to us.

And Lord, may You do Your Glorious Saving Work,
In Jesus' Name,
Amen...