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# Gospel Preaching in Ministry Hardships

## 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:10<sup>6</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

The Bible presents a very different picture of the Christian life and ministry that is publicly taught and commonly accepted.

“What kind of God wants you to be poor and miserable? ...”

“The gospel is about heaven here. Not just spiritual, but physical...”

“People in the Bible suffered so that we do not...”

But a long host of saints have stood at the cross in the Scriptures and have seen Jesus’ suffering as something that we must not only endure but embrace. The New Testament clearly teaches us that there can be no discipleship without suffering. There can be no disciple who is not a sufferer. I think that too many people imagine that we do not need to be broken even though we live in such brokenness.

Maturity and ministry only grow and flourish in the garden of suffering. The clouds bring the rain which nourishes the harvest of righteousness. Gospel preaching has risen highest when then the witnessing saints struggled the most.

### **Its Motivating Rationale (v. 11-15)**

Paul grounds our motivation for gospel centered ministry in our accountability to the Lord and the rewards one day to be given us.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. <sup>12</sup> We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. <sup>13</sup> For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. <sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

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### ***The Fear of the Lord (v. 11)***

Since we know in a personal and practical way, the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. The common understanding of this reads this as saying, "Because we fear what will happen at the Bema Seat with the gain and loss of rewards, we engage in evangelism." I am not sure that is what Paul is talking initially about.

It seems to me what Paul knows about what God is doing *in the lives of others* causes him to seek to be persuasive to others. He is not fearful for himself. He is fearful for others. He is not trembling for himself. He is trembling for others.

Paul persuades *them*. What he is doing is persuading them to whole-hearted discipleship. For Paul, gospel ministry begins with the lost and continues with the wavered. There is a kind of persuasion that constantly draws people to follow Jesus.

Paul, knowing the seriousness of following Christ, persuades the Corinthians to believe and to live in the Gospel.

### ***A Clear Conscience (v. 11-12)***

Paul is also concerned to have a clear conscience. His conscience is clear before God. He has faithfully sought to persuade people. He hopes that they can affirm his clear conscience. He doesn't need it. But he certainly wants it for their sake.

Just to be clear, he points out his purpose for speaking again of a clear conscience. He is not looking to commend himself. He is aiming to give them reasons to speak well, to praise what God is doing through him for them. This is a difficult and fine line. But it exists. It is possible to be appreciative and admiring of God in the commendable ministry His people do.

The important thing in a clear conscience and in commending others is how we set the standard. The church at Corinth has been all about the externals. Its measures for success and spiritual leadership were mostly informed and shaped by the world and its wisdom. The Christian standard for commended ministry is the beliefs and wants of the heart. Outward appearance has very limited value. But the right heart towards God and others is to be prized above all things.

We want to orient our own thinking about ministry as Paul shows us. We should have a clear conscience and aim for others to be able to affirm it. We must set aside the world's standards which focus on the appearance of things. I believe we should stop saying and stop agreeing with statements like, "Appearance is reality." That is simply not true. Neither is it true that, "Perception is reality." What matters in ministry is that our hearts are right. We understand that if our hearts are right, our behavior will trend toward righteousness.

### ***A Passionate Persuasion (v. 13)***

Paul's passionate persuasion seems to have led to a charge that he was out of his mind. I don't think we should understand that as a literal charge. But it sure bothered the Corinthians. They came away from his teaching and preaching wondering if Paul was crazy. Paul laughs it off. "If I am out of mind, it is for God. If I am sane and rational, it is for your sake." But there is a clear sense in which they were uncomfortable with the passion and persuasiveness of Paul. He was so engaged with God and with their great need that he spoke clearly, logically and emotionally.

### ***The Love of Christ (v. 14)***

Why would he preach and teach with persuasion and emotion? Because he is driven, motivated, controlled by the love of Christ. The love of Christ for His people controls Paul in ministry to the degree that he has a clear conscience, a persuasive preaching and a passionate appeal. He is not like the philosophers of his day – dry, logical, detached. But his passion is not derived from or driven by that which fuels the passionate outbursts of Corinthian excesses. His ministry at times may appear as theirs does and thus might be seen as affirming them. But Paul's persuasion and passion is lit and fueled by the love of Christ.

This raises a question for all who teach and preach here. Not that we are to seek to be passionate outside of ourselves, but are we so convinced of the love of God and need of people that we speak with persuasively and passionately? Now let us avoid artificiality. Eschew both a detached, factual based teaching and preaching as well as emotional preaching for its own sake. But to be persuasive and passionate in your communication you must have been passionately persuaded of the love of Christ.

### ***A Transforming Theology (v. 14-15)***

Listen again to what Paul says.

<sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

The love of Christ controls them, because they have arrived at a settled conclusion. They have a theological commitment that sets their hearts on fire. This is a simple statement of Paul's application of the gospel to Christians. All Christ died for have died. He died for them all that they might live. They now live, not for themselves, but for Jesus, who died and was raised. This is the gospel for Christians in a sentence. This is Romans 6. Jesus' love controls our persuasion and our passion in teaching because we are utterly convinced that Jesus' death and resurrection mean we have died and are to live for Him.

Does this sound strange in your ears? Have you considered what actually motivates and moves you in ministry? Do you serve because of Christ's constraining love? What

does it mean to you to live for Christ? Is the basics of Christian living and ministry? Is that how Paul sees it?

One writer has so helpfully summarized this paragraph for us.

From now on' (verse 16) he lived for the one who had loved him (verse 14) and died and risen again for him (verse 15). Hatred for Christ, as Paul's controlling motive, had now been replaced by the overwhelming sense of Christ's love for him. He no longer regarded Christ in purely superficial terms (verse 16), as the crucified and therefore the accursed one, but as the one in whom God had been present to reconcile the world to himself. Moreover, in that decisive moment near Damascus, God gave the now enlightened Paul the ministry (verse 18) and message (verse 19) of reconciliation, whereupon he constantly sought to persuade people (verse 11) to be reconciled to God (verse 20). Let the Corinthians understand that what this man teaches is not merely one opinion among others but the out-working of his historic encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. (Barnett, p. 102)

## **Its Biblical Development (v. 16-21)**

The simple statement of the gospel leads into a wonderful Biblical development.

<sup>16</sup> From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

### ***The Personal Development (v. 16)***

Paul points out how this is true for him. Since Christ has died and was raised again his way of understanding and evaluating people has radically changed. He used to measure people by the flesh. For Paul, this meant according to Jewish Law and custom. Paul now sees Judaism as a part of the world. He does this often in other texts. That is very surprising to us. But, you will really struggle with Paul's understanding of redemptive-history if you do not grasp this. Before his conversion, Paul regarded Christ from the flesh; that is, according to his religion. But now he regards Christ differently. This shapes how he regards Christians.

### ***The Redemptive Change (v. 17)***

Why is this? Because a redemptive change has taken place. We have had something radical happen to us. If we are in Christ, then we are a new creation. The old life is gone. The new life has come. This makes all the difference. We are to live for Christ. Paul's persuasion and passion serves to help people understand. He wants them to live as new creations. He wants them to believe the old is gone. He is passionate about the gospel and what it says has already happened to us.

### ***The Divine Work (v. 18-19)***

This is God's doing. He has done the work the gospel speaks of.

God has reconciled us. Our sin and wickedness separated us from God and incurred His wrath and anger. But God satisfied that wrath and therefore has reconciled us to Himself. We can now be reconciled to God and be restored to a relationship with Him.

God has given to us the ministry, the service of reconciliation. God applies the work of reconciliation He has done through the ministry He has given us.

God has entrusted to us the message, the meaning of reconciliation. This is where we want to be careful. This entrustment was first and primarily to the Apostles. The message and meaning was given to us through the Scriptures given to them. But we have the message of reconciliation which is what we are to proclaim.

There is an unspoken question here that would have been obvious to the Corinthians. How can they be entrusted with the ministry and message of reconciliation if they are unreconciled to Paul and to each other? How does one serve in and speak about reconciliation to the lost when there is so much unresolved conflict among the believers and with their leaders? This is part of Paul's point. As those assigned the ministry of bringing people back to God, we need to be a people who are reconciled and restored to one another.

### ***The Ministry Effort (v. 20)***

Since we have the message to speak, we also have the model for our ministry. Since it is a message of reconciliation, then the Apostles (the "we" here) are sent as ambassadors. They were the first of the commissional messengers to go into the world. God was speaking through them both in their preaching and in their writing.

We go as they did. We teach and preach the gospel to world. We also stand to implore unbelievers to be reconciled to God through the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we are true to what the Bible says of the gospel then God is also speaking through us. The message is to be lived out in our own lives. And it is to be proclaimed to all who are alienated from God.

The startling thing here is in this sentence, "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." What sticks out here? "We implore you..." Speaking to the

church, the people in the church at Corinth he implores them to be reconciled to God. What does this mean?

It may mean that there were Christians whose lives were so sinful that they were functionally living alienated from God. They needed to hear again the call to repent. They needed to hear the gospel. They needed to know their sins had been forgiven. They needed to accept and live as people who had been reconciled to God.

It may be that there were people at the church who were not true believers. They were estranged and alienated and separated from God. They were religious. But, they were not reconciled to God. They needed to respond to the powerful, persuasive appeal of gospel preaching.

Likely it was both. From all that we have seen about the church we know there were very carnal Christians there and there were people who had functionally rejected the gospel.

### ***The Saving Exchange (v. 21)***

At the heart of the gospel is a doctrine that is under attack and is being denied today.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

What you see in this verse is called the doctrine of imputation. Fundamentally to impute is to credit to and treat someone with something that is not naturally their own. In the Scriptures, this is done to such a degree that it becomes a part of their identity. And exchange has taken place.

Jesus, who had no sin, had never committed any sin nor knew any sin at all, had our sin credited to Him. This was done so that God could treat the righteous and innocent Jesus as though He had committed all our sins. Thus, we say, emphatically, that our sins were imputed to Jesus. They were put to Jesus' account.

All of us who are in Christ, have God's righteousness put to our account. God's righteousness is credited to us so that we are treated as righteous people. So we stand before God, not having our own righteousness, but having God's credited to us. We are no longer bankrupt; we have been made rich in righteousness.

Our sin has been imputed to Jesus. God's righteousness has been imputed to us. John Stott said quoting this verse is all that is needed to answer and refute the new perspective on Paul or any heresy that denies Biblical imputation. Our sin has been exchanged for God's righteousness.

### ***The Evangelistic Appeal (6:1-2)***

<sup>1</sup> Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup> For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Paul cites Isaiah 49:8 as the grounds of his appeal to them. I know that it is popular to use this verse to reference an appeal for a personal response in evangelism. I want you to listen to the surround text in Isaiah 49 and see if possibly Paul has something else in mind.

<sup>6</sup> he [God] says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

<sup>7</sup> Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers:

"Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

<sup>8</sup> Thus says the LORD: "In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages,

The Isaiah text is talking about the "day", that is the age in which the salvation promised to Israel will go out into all the world. So, the appeal then is not to say, "On this day today" but rather, "In this age, now..." This age now is the time of favor or the age of grace. This fits with his earlier use of the new creation in Christ. Yes, certainly, we should persuade and implore people to respond to the message of reconciliation through the gospel. God is giving calling all kinds of people everywhere in this age. We preach now in this age to anyone who will hear. And yes, in this age, and in fact, today, listen, hear, heed what the gospel says.

Brothers and sisters, we have been reconciled to God through the death of Jesus Christ. We can now receive God's merciful grace in this favorable, gracious age. As people reconciled to God, we are to be reconciled to each other. As God's people we have the ministry and message of reconciliation to all the world, in this day, when all who hear and heed can be saved. But do we? In our own way, within our own gifts, taking advantage of our opportunities, do we see ourselves as ambassadors for Christ with the ministry of reconciliation witnessing and proclaiming the message of reconciliation. This is the favorable time, the gracious age.

## **Its Challenging Hardships (6:3-10)**

This is a wondrous ministry and a deeply challenging one.

<sup>3</sup> We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup> but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup> by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; <sup>7</sup> by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup> through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup> as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup> as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

This is shaped by the sets of prepositions.

### ***With a Commended Life (v. 3-4)***

Paul and those serving with him sought to put no obstacle in people's way. They wanted no fault, no sin, to be found in the way they did ministry. They simply commended themselves as God's servants. They did this though, not by writing letters, or giving diplomas or advertising one another. They commended themselves by the way they responded to the challenging hardships that came in ministry and from people.

### ***In Terrible Sufferings (v.4- 5)***

Linger over these words: enduring, affliction, hardship, calamity, beating, prison, riot, excruciating labor like childbirth, sleepless nights, hunger. These are a catalog of the troubles that filled the ministry travels of the Pauline band. So, the amazing privilege of having the ministry and message of reconciliation was carried out in the most unimaginable litany of suffering.

Similar things are suffered by brothers and sisters all over the world and down through the ages. The greater our privileges the greater can be our pains. But we know so little of this. I pray that when... and I said, when... days like this and troubles like this come we will live well, minister well and endure. But dear ones, what you will not do now, you will not do then.

### ***By Godly Character (v. 6-7)***

Linger over these words: purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Spirit, love truth, power and spiritual weapons rightly suited to the wielder. Here is godly character, maturity, and ministry largely expressed when we experience opposition. When you are pressed, when you are opposed, when you struggle with time, resources, people... do these virtues flow out of a life that is keeping in step with the Spirit.



### ***With Great Mistreatment (v. 8-10)***

Linger over the paradoxes of these words. There will be times of honor and other times of dishonor. We will experience being slandered and praised. We will be rejected as frauds yet know we are the genuine. We will be treated as no-bodies when we well know God is using us. We will know what it means to be near death, yet still live. We will be punished for faith but not killed. Joy will watercolor our sorrows. We will be poor while see and even contribute to the riches of others. We live as though we have nothing knowing that we actually have everything.

Do you feel the rebuke here? Is not the Holy Spirit in the text exposing our trivial pursuits? We seek praise, authenticity, acceptance, a full life with a minimum of sacrifice, hardship and a maximum of comforts. We want happiness, fullness and the good life now.

It is little wonder that we are not so good as ministers of the message of reconciliation...

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## **Reflect and Respond**

This is Paul's life. He has been beaten and imprisoned. He has faced angry mobs. He has worked to exhaustion. He has endured sleepless nights and hunger. He has endured all these things through God's love and power. Paul is honest yet has been called a liar (6:8). He is known yet unknown. He is dying, yet he lives. He is sorrowful yet always rejoices. He is poor yet makes many rich. He has nothing yet possesses everything.

There is much to ponder and somewhat to repent.

What does a text like this even mean to you? What does this mean to me?

Do you retreat into, "Well this was for Paul and the Apostles and maybe a select, elite few today. This is not for the ordinary Christian today." If you can say that with a good conscience, then, good on you.

What response does Paul expect from the Corinthian church? Does this point us to our own needs?

To live in way that our life is the context for the gospel.

To embrace the gospel for ourselves.

To be poised to speak of the saving grace of Christ when opportunity affords.

To be prepared to suffer well when hardship comes.

We are reconciled to God. Praise God for that. But are we poised and moving towards being reconciled with one another?

This is the day, the time, the age of God's gracious favor. Do not receive His grace in vain. Believe and bow not only to be saved, but to make progress in holiness.

Why? Because, if you are in Christ, the old is gone. The new has come.