

Introduction

The Corinthian church was a notoriously difficult group. 2 Corinthians is the fourth of Paul's letters to this church, with one lost letter being written before 1 Corinthians and another before this letter. In spite of Paul's extensive attention to this church, his authority continues to be questioned and his message denigrated.

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul had to deal with all sorts of problems. The Corinthians are caught up in the culture of their day. They are arrogant about their command of modern sounding wisdom and knowledge.

As a result, they manifested all sorts of problems.

- This is constant divisiveness within the congregation: who had the better teacher, the better baptism, the better gifts than another.
- They engaged in all sorts of wicked behavior, including incest, petty litigiousness, and drunkenness at the Lord's table.
- Theological error: denying the resurrection, taking marriage and family lightly, dabbling with idolatry.

Sounds familiar doesn't it?

One of the amazing things that we see in Paul's relationship with this church is that Paul's love for them never seems to waver! This little portion of Paul's letter is another demonstration of his affection and commitment to them.

He has just pled with them to be reconciled to God.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (5:17-18) ...

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—for He says, “at the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.” Behold, now is “the acceptable time,” behold, now is “the day of salvation” (5:20–6:2).¹

What a passionate and heart-felt call to believe the gospel of reconciliation! Who could argue with that? Apparently, the Corinthians could and did!

Because of his love for this church, Paul doesn't want them to receive the grace of God in vain, that is, to hear about God's grace, yet reject it. For that reason, he is again defending the authenticity of his *message* by defending the authenticity of his *ministry*, having done so many times before, both in 1Co and in 2Co.²

Today we're just going to look at verses 3–10, where Paul lays out two purposes:

1. to remove obstacles to the receipt of God's grace by the Corinthians,
2. to demonstrate that he and his compatriots as God's servants, rather than serving themselves.

And he's going to do that in three ways, by his:

1. suffering,
2. manner of life, and,
3. Commitment to Christ.

¹2 Corinthians 5:17–6:2.

²See 2 Corinthians 4:2, 5:13, 11:4, for examples.

By Suffering

First, he shows that he has put no obstacles in the way of the gospel and that he is God's servant through his suffering.

In much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger ... (4-5)

There are those who “preach Christ from envy and rivalry ... out of selfish ambition”.³

Instead, Paul demonstrates that he is striving to be like Christ, who made himself low in order to exalt us.

For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.⁴

Brothers and sisters, this is in part what the gospel looks like. We can rail and complain about our world all we wish. However, our lives must comport with our preaching and teaching. And if we are teaching people to look like Christ, then we need to look like Christ. That means getting our hands dirty in the world around us. And that means that we will suffer.

Simply being ready to be part of another person's suffering is hardship. Watching another person's distress is distressing. Being patient with the immature or rebellious, walking alongside those who are afflicted requires endurance and will draw us into their affliction. This doesn't even take into account the consequences of a fallen world which we must endure in our own lives!

³Philippians 1:15-17.

⁴2 Corinthians 2:4.

For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.⁵

Scarcely baptized self-help programs are not the gospel. The gospel of Jesus, the gospel that calls us to be reconciled to God, is a gospel that calls us to go deeply into the nature of the fall and root out its causes by the power of the Holy Spirit. And there is no way to do that without getting our own hands dirty.

This is the kind of authenticity that is needed in our day. This isn't the fake religion of dressing nicely, coming to church with smiles on our faces, when our marriages are in disarray, our children are causing us distress, those close to us are severely ill or dying, or financial troubles are pressing in on us. This is authentic obedience to Christ of embracing suffering as a characteristic of being a servant of God. It's a way of saying, "I've been there, too! I know what it's like. Let me walk alongside you. Let me share with you how Christ has comforted me."

By Manner of Life

Paul's willingness to walk alongside the Corinthians in spite of hardship is one way in which he seeks to remove obstacles to receiving God's grace and by which he demonstrates and commends his service to God. Another way is by his manner of life (6-8). By:

- purity,
- knowledge,

⁵2 Corinthians 1:5-6,

- patience,
- kindness,
- the Holy Spirit, *which results in* genuine love,
- the word of truth, *which is itself* the power of God;
- by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left.

We can imagine a well-equipped warrior with the Holy Spirit and genuine love in one hand, the power of God in the word of truth in the other.

Aren't these things that the world needs? That we need for ourselves?

St. John's, it's this kind of character, even in the midst of a broken world that will commend us to the world around us. Paul is demonstrating that he is not broken by the work of the ministry. He has been bent, folded, stapled, and mutilated (as the old computer punch cards used to read) by ministry; however, he has not been destroyed.

His manner of life is, again, Christ's manner of life.

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁶

Paul's patience with the Corinthians, his kindness, his genuine love, while still speaking the truth are all characteristics of his master, the Lord Jesus.

⁶Philippians 2:4-8

By Commitment

By Paul's willingness to undergo hardship, by his ethical manner of life, and finally, by his commitment in spite of misunderstanding and slander are his ministry and message demonstrated as being in service to God.

By glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things. (6:8–10)

How is it that Paul is able to keep going, especially with regard to these hard-headed Corinthians?

- In some cases, honored and respected; in others dishonored.
- In some cases, favorably spoken about; in others, condemned and maligned.
- Speak the truthing, yet still called a liar.
- Unknown by others, yet well known by God.
- Considered to be “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”⁷
- As sorrowful, yet rejoicing: Paul has written to the Corinthians with tears, and **also** rejoices in even the smallest of their triumphs in holiness and godliness.

⁷2Co 4:10–11.

- Punished: see chapter 11’s list of hardships, yet by God’s grace still alive.
- Poverty of material wealth, but thereby enriching the Corinthians. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”⁸
- Having nothing, but having everything! Everything by which Paul could have had “gain” in the world, he counted as rubbish.⁹ “If children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”¹⁰

What keeps Paul going?

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. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. **For the love of Christ controls us**, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 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.¹¹

Oh, how vital that message of reconciliation and how deeply aware Paul is of Christ’s love for him and for us! That’s what keeps him going!

⁸2 Corinthians 8:9.

⁹Philippians 3:8.

¹⁰Romans 8:17.

¹¹2 Corinthians 5:12–15.

Conclusion

The collect for today says, in part: “give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey your godly motivations in righteousness, and true holiness, to your honor and glory”. Paul’s words call us to stand out in our commitment to the ministry of reconciliation. It’s not just a message of reconciliation, but a ministry.

It’s a willingness to embrace the brokenness of the world in our own arms, rather than look for the short-term comforts of this life. We must “consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us”.¹²

It’s a manner of life that stands out for holiness and confidence in Christ Jesus.

It’s commitment to our ambassadorial office of being ministers of reconciliation to God.

This is a message anchors our own souls, removes any opportunity for our message to be discredited, and confirms that we are but the servants of God.

I’m very thankful for John Piper’s helpful sermon on this text, “Sorrowful, Yet Always Rejoicing”.

¹²Romans 8:18.

My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less

On Christ The Solid Rock I Stand

WORDS: Edward Mote, c. 1834

MUSIC: William B. Bradbury, 1863

8.8.8.8 (L.M.) with Refrain

1. My hope is built on no-thing less than Je-sus' blood and right-eous-ness.
 2. When darkness veils his love-ly face, I rest on his un-chang-ing grace;
 3. His oath, his cov e - nant, his blood sup-port me in the whelming flood.
 4. When he shall come with trump-et sound, O may I then in him be found,

5 I dare not trust the sweet-est frame, but wholly lean on Je - sus' name.
 in ev - 'ry high and storm - y gale, my anchor holds with - in the veil.
 When all a-round my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.
 dressed in his right - eous-ness a - lone, fault-less to stand be - fore the throne.

9 CHORUS
 On Christ the so - lid rock I stand; all o - ther ground

12 is sink - ing sand. All o - ther ground is sink - ing sand.

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