

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

We Appeal To You
February 14th, 2016
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 6:1; that's on page 966 in your pew Bibles. For the last couple of weeks we have listened to the Apostle Paul explain to the Corinthians how things are, how things will be and how God has rescued us through the life and death of Jesus Christ. All of this is from God – Paul says – even our coming to you as his ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us. This is from God! He cares about you. He has heard your groaning, he has taken note of your situation and he has come in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. He has come to do for us what we could never do for ourselves and to pay for what we have done in his body on the cross. Christ has come – and now in chapter 6:1 Paul says:

Working together with him, then, **we appeal to you** not to receive the grace of God in vain.
(2 Corinthians 6:1 ESV)

Notice the word Paul uses there – he says, “we appeal to you” – Paul had just said a few verses earlier:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.
(2 Corinthians 5:20 ESV)

We are the APPEAL OF GOD TO YOU! WE ARE WORKING TOGETHER WITH GOD in

order to reach you! That’s what Paul is saying here and he’s saying it because he was aware that there were other people speaking to the Corinthians who were trying to lure them away from Paul, away from the Apostolic Gospel and ultimately away from God in Christ.

So Paul gets urgent here. He gets personal. He lays it all on the line and he makes his appeal. This is a complicated passage because it deals with a very particular situation – it deals with Paul’s unique authority as an apostle and so my plan is to walk through this text section by section and then to do the careful work of response and application at the end. I’d love for you to have your Bibles open as we work through this wonderful text together.

Understanding The Text:

Let’s begin with the introduction to this new section as we read it in verse 1.

1. The Introduction

Paul says:

¹ Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

² 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. (2 Corinthians 6:1–2 ESV)

To understand what Paul means by receiving the grace of God in vain you have to understand the quotation that he provides from the prophet Isaiah in verse 2. That comes from Isaiah 49. I want you to listen to that passage – it is an absolutely beautiful picture of salvation. God says:

⁸ “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,⁹ saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’ They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture;¹⁰ they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.¹¹ And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. (Isaiah 49:8–11 ESV)

Are you hearing that? God says: “In a time of favor – in a time of grace, I will come to you. I will save you and say to you “Come out!” I will call to people in darkness and say, “Come home”. I will lead you in a safe way, I will not let you perish for I will have pity on you. I myself will deal with every obstacle to your return. Is there a mountain – is there a heavy weight

that would keep you down in the darkness? I will deal with it and I will lift you up.” Isn’t that beautiful? Isn’t that the Gospel? Isn’t that this? (See chart 2)

Paul references that passage and he says “don’t you understand that today is that day? Don’t you understand that this is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ? He has heard us, he has seen our difficulty, he has had pity on us and he has come to call us out of darkness and into his marvelous light. Don’t you see how he has taken the mountain of sin and guilt that would threaten to drag us down into death and hell and he has OBLITERATED IT through the power of the righteous life and death of Jesus Christ? Don’t you see what this is? This is the day of salvation – this is the way home! Don’t receive the grace of God in vain! Don’t come to this point, don’t hear this message of salvation and ignore it; because there is NO PLAN B – there is no other option coming – this is it! This is the grace of God – if you want to come home then this is how you get there. Confess your sins, cling to the cross and BE SAVED!

That’s Paul’s appeal. He knows that they are looking into other options. They are looking into the false promise of future options BEYOND the grace junction. That’s the devil’s lie. He is working this station too. He is on that train whispering to every passenger: “This is not the only option. There will be other stations yet to come. No need to decide today. There are other preachers beside this Apostle Paul, there are other viewpoints. Best to keep your options open.” That’s the devil’s lie – Paul knows it – and so he gets personal and he gets urgent. TODAY is the day of salvation. This is the last and only stop before your ultimate landing in death and hell. Repent! Get up out of your seat and come to Christ.

There is nothing standing in your way, he says in verse 3 – there is no obstacle. You can come right now and be received at the foot of the cross. I appeal to you brothers and sisters, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

2. The Apostle’s Commendation

As we mentioned last week, part of persuading others involves the presentation of evidence. In 5:11 Paul said:

knowing the fear of the Lord, we **persuade** others. (2 Corinthians 5:11 ESV)

To persuade others means to convince by means of argument, evidence and analogy. In 6:3-10 Paul begins to present evidence from his own life in order to convince them to embrace the Apostolic Gospel. This is the point of the passage where we have to remember that the original context here was about Paul's unique authority as an Apostle and his unique relationship to the Corinthian church. There were false apostles now in Corinth trying to lure these folks away from Paul and from Christ by means of false teaching. There were Judaizers who wanted to lure them back into Judaism, there were Greek teachers who wanted to lure them into a type of cultural accommodation – a type of half-breed Christianity that would have one foot in the world and one foot in faith – Paul is trying to pull them up out of those ditches and back onto the narrow way of the Gospel. He is fighting for their souls here and as part of that he begins to gather evidence from his own unique journey as an Apostle.

His argument is hard to follow in English. In English we would organize a complex argument like this one by using headings and paragraph breaks and bold fonts – they didn't do that in Greek instead they used little particles, conjunctions and prepositions. Nevertheless, what Paul is saying is fairly straightforward. He is arguing that God has proven and commended him as an Apostle by means of various things.

First of all Paul talks about his remarkable and obviously God given:

- i. Endurance (in various kinds of trouble and affliction) v.4-5**
- ii. Graces (manifesting in Spiritual fruit, Spiritual power and effective ministry) v.6-7**
- iii. Circumstances (which mimic and mirror the circumstances of the Lord) v.7-8**
- iv. Vindications And Rescues (showing resurrection power and proving him true) v.8-10**

Keep that breakdown open in front of you as we hear Paul commending himself to the Corinthians, beginning at verse 4:

⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: **by great endurance, in** afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ **by** purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; **with** the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated **as** impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet

possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:4–10 ESV)

These are the marks of a true Apostle, Paul says and they prove that God is speaking to you through me. Now we need to remember from our walk through 1 Corinthians that some folks there tended to over-emphasize #2 – Graces and Spiritual Gifts. The trouble though with making that the be all and end all indicator of apostolic authority is that those things can be faked. Paul says that again and again. The devil has his agents operating in the world and they do their work with all manner of lying signs and wonders – 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 – so we need to look deeper than that. Paul’s life as a whole, he argues, proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is uniquely at work in him. His life has been shaped and controlled by the Gospel. His life looks like death and resurrection. There is weakness and hardship on the one hand – but there is power and rescue on the other! Every time you think I’m down, Paul says, God raises me up – literally and figuratively. Do you remember the time that Paul was stoned after preaching the Gospel in Lystra? Acts 14 says:

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. (Acts 14:19–20 ESV)

God vindicated Paul’s ministry by literally raising him up from the dead. That’s the proof of my apostleship, Paul says, my life mimics and mirrors the saving work of God in Jesus Christ!

That’s Paul’s commendation and then in verses 11-13 we witness his final appeal:

3. His Final Appeal

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also. (2 Corinthians 6:11–13 ESV)

Receive me. Receive us – the true Apostles of Jesus Christ. On behalf of Christ we implore you – BE RECONCILED TO GOD.

Responding To The Text:

That’s what the text is saying – but this is one of those texts that is relatively easy to understand

and relatively difficult to apply. The tricky thing here is that this passage is so obviously personal. When Paul is talking about Jesus then we know exactly how to apply that: the same way today that we would have then. But when Paul is talking about himself and his particular relationship with a church – we’re not exactly sure what to do with that. Listen to how one very reliable and trustworthy commentator explains the challenge we face in applying this passage; he states the question fairly:

“The question is: Do these words apply beyond the apostolic generation to persons who are not apostles?”¹

That’s the question. He explains the passage much as we have done and then he returns to it and concludes:

“Thus understood, these verses cannot be applied without qualification to others outside the apostolic circle beyond the apostolic age. Such persons do not bear the direct authority of Christ, as his ambassadors, in the way Paul did.”²

Paul – as with Peter and John and so on – Paul was an ambassador for Jesus in a way that you and I are not. God did things in Paul’s life – as he did with the other Apostles – that vindicated Paul and proved his authority to speak on his behalf. God raised up Paul from a STONING – he may not do that for you. Don’t use that technique to convince your friends that you speak a true Gospel. God was uniquely invested in proving his Apostles. He blessed them with healing graces that he might not bless you with. We are still called to pray for healings and thanks be to God, we receive them, from time to time – but let’s be honest – not in the SAME WAY that the Apostles received them. Peter raised a little girl FROM THE DEAD. That’s a BIG MIRACLE. Paul raised the young man Eutychus from the dead or from the near dead, the text doesn’t say, but clearly THAT’S A BIG MIRACLE. This text is NOT promising that God will vindicate your ministry in exactly that way. We have to be clear on that.

But, Barnett goes on to say:

“However, the apostolate is not the only ministry that has been “given” Presumably the moral authority legitimating Paul’s ministry, noted above, is the same for all other ministries – official and unofficial – engaged in by believers to this day.”³

¹ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle To The Corinthians* in *The New International Commentary On The New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 320.

² Barnett, 320.

³ Barnett, 320.

Here's the point, let me bring this down to street level. This passage is not promising that God will vindicate and commend your Gospel ministry in exactly the same way that he vindicated and commended the Apostle Paul's ministry. You are not an Apostle and you don't require and shouldn't have that level of authority anyway. You have authority to speak to people on behalf of God with the help of the Holy Spirit but you do that while standing ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE APOSTOLIC GOSPEL – that's the difference and so you can expect that God will vindicate and commend you in this general PATTERN but not to these Apostolic PROPORTIONS. Do you get that? The Apostles give us a pattern but do not promise us like proportion. The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament Apostles had unique authority to explain and outline the Gospel. Paul said that the church is being:

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20 ESV)

The prophets preached forward, the apostles preach backwards and they all point to Christ. We stand on that pattern and speak in proportion to the grace given to us. Do you see that? Let me put it this way (pointing to Graph 2) you are not laying track at the Grace Junction - you are handing out maps. The prophets and apostles were laying tracks – prophets toward Christ, apostles from Christ – they are part of the foundation of the grace junction – you are not. Its built, its done, its all been said – you are just spreading the word. You're saying: "I know the way home. Follow me and come to Christ!" And therefore our commendation is in like pattern with the Apostles but NOT in like proportion. With that in mind let me suggest two appropriate responses to this text.

1. We should trust the Apostles to explain and apply the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Now that may sound obvious to you but believe me it needs to be said. Evangelicalism is laboring right now under the impact of Red Letter Christianity. Red Letter Christianity is basically the idea that we would have more success in our evangelism if we truncated our Christian message to include only the words actually spoken by Jesus Christ in the flesh. Basically this means reading the Gospels and ignoring everything in your New Testament that comes after that. It means not reading what Paul said about sexual ethics. It means not reading

what Peter said about marriage. It means not reading what John said about our duty to love the body of Christ. The Red Letter people are saying: “Leave that all behind, it just makes the Gospel harder to swallow and more difficult to live out.” That’s what they’re telling us but here is the problem with that – that isn’t what Jesus actually SAID he wanted us to do. In those Red Letters Jesus said that he intended to finish his Gospel proclamation through the ministry of his Apostles. He said that in John 14, 15 and 16. On the night he was betrayed, before he was handed over to the Jewish authorities by Judas, Jesus had a last conversation with his disciples and he spoke to them at great length about his plan to complete his Gospel proclamation through them with the help of the Holy Spirit. Listen to what he says:

²⁵ “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:25–26 ESV)

²⁶ when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. ²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26–27 ESV)

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12–14 ESV)

Are you hearing that? On Jesus’ last night on planet earth before his crucifixion he said to his disciples ‘I have more to teach you but you can’t receive it now. After I die and rise again I will send you my Holy Spirit. He will be your teacher and he will lead you into ALL TRUTH. He will bear witness AND YOU WILL BEAR WITNESS because YOU HAVE BEEN WITH ME FROM THE BEGINNING’. Now obviously that promise cannot be claimed without qualification by anyone sitting in this room today. We were not with Jesus from the beginning. This is something Jesus is saying specifically to his apostles. The Holy Spirit is going to finish the work I have begun. You are going to help him. You are my Apostles – you are my capital A-Ambassadors. You have a special commission. That’s why Paul said in the very first verse we read this morning:

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you (2 Corinthians 6:1 ESV)

There is no Red Letter Gospel my friends, there is only the APOSTOLIC GOSPEL! Have nothing to do with that modern day heresy. Trust the Apostles and the Prophets. Trust the forward preaching of the Old Testament Prophets and trust the backward preaching of the New

Testament Apostles – ALL SCRIPTURE IS GIVEN BY INSPIRATION OF GOD and is PROFITABLE! It all works – it is all powerful and you can trust every page of it and you can build your life upon it. That’s the first and most obvious application of this passage. But there is one more that we can safely make and it is this:

2. We should make every effort to commend ourselves to those with whom we share the Gospel

Paul Barnett, in that quote I read to you spoke about “moral authority”. Whenever we share the Gospel with people we need to be concerned with our moral authority. The authority of the Apostolic Gospel is primary but our moral authority as Gospel messengers is not unimportant. If you are sharing the Gospel with folks but you are not living the Gospel and showing the Gospel in the manner of your own conduct and attitudes then you will lack moral authority in your ministry. You know this. If you are sharing the Gospel with your friends, but you are sleeping around or dropping the F bomb at work or cheating on your taxes or refusing to forgive someone who wronged you then you are effectively undermining yourself as a Gospel messenger. Moral authority matters; you know that.

And so I want to end on a really practical note. Here are some things you can do – by the grace of God you can do these things and over the long haul they will increase the gravity and attraction of your Gospel message. I’m offering these from the pattern of the Apostle Paul without any promise of like proportion.

i. Endure – Keep the faith through difficulties, trials and setbacks

Fair-weather faith just doesn’t sell very well. If you can only follow Jesus when you are surrounded by Christian friends, living with your parents, holding down a good job or enjoying perfect health don’t expect great results when you try and share your faith with other people. But if you’ve been tested and you have stayed the course then you will have moral authority and God will use that to penetrate hearts that have been previously closed to the Gospel.

Some of you know exactly what I’m talking about. Some of you prayed for a son or a daughter or a husband that has been HARDENED to the Gospel. You need to understand that God may

answer your prayer by ordaining very difficult circumstances for you. He may allow that loved one to watch you hold fast to your Savior in your trial. Be prepared for that. Nothing adds moral authority to Gospel messengers like endurance under trial.

ii. Grow – Grow in your graces through attention to the ordinary means

There is nothing more compelling than a changed person. Grow. Deal with your garbage, confess your sin, seek grace and grow up. That will get noticed over time – I guarantee it. Do the things that help you grow. Attend to the ordinary means. Read your Bible. Pray like crazy. Come to church. Sit under the Word. Participate in the ordinances. Immerse yourself in Christian community. Serve others. Do that and you will grow; by the grace of God you will grow and your loved ones will see and you will find yourself speaking with new and increased authority.

iii. Shine – Live a Jesus shaped life that adorns and commends the Gospel

The Apostle Paul talked about how his life was literally shaped and controlled by the Gospel. God pressed him down and God raised him up; as we read together earlier, God even raised him up after being left for dead outside of Lystra. His whole life was about dying and living through the power of Jesus Christ. That added tremendous gravity and authority to his Gospel witness and in that same pattern even if not necessarily in the same Apostolic proportion, so can it be for us.

God may not raise you up from a stoning but he might set you free from an addiction. He might bring you back from the very brink of death and hell – and set your feet upon the rock so that you can rejoice in your salvation and display his saving grace.

Do you want a louder voice? Do you want to get the attention of people who are hardened to the Gospel? Then die to your self and live for Christ. Put to death sexual immorality, impurity, lust and evil desire and covetousness which is idolatry – which is self worship – put that to death by the power of the Holy Spirit and live for Christ. Live a Gospel shaped life. Worship God. Love one another. Serve the world - that is a Jesus shaped life – that is a miracle and that is how God grows your voice and commends your Gospel ministry. As with Paul so with us; this is the Word

of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.