

In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul will speak of himself and his colleagues as “servants” of God.

Yes, Jesus *is* the Servant of the LORD –

and Paul will use Isaiah 53 to speak of what *Jesus* did for us –

Jesus is the innocent suffering servant – who became sin for us,

so that we might become (in him) the righteousness of God.

And because Jesus is the Servant of the LORD

therefore those who are called to be servants of God

in the ministry of reconciliation

must exhibit the characteristics of the suffering servant.

Chris Wisdom has said this really well:

“Grounded in God’s redemptive grace accomplished in Christ,

selfish sinners are now graciously invited into union with Him

in a new status, a new spirituality, and a new service,

following Him into this ministry of fruitful servant leadership

in the way of humility, submission, obedience, suffering, and hope.

In this way, Christian servant leaders follow Jesus the Messianic Servant Leader

through all these steps of humiliation

in the sure hope that God will fully and finally exalt His image in them

with Christ, all by God’s grace and only for God’s glory.”

We sing about the same pattern in Psalm 23 –

the song of the suffering servant.

Sing Psalm 23

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:13

Our three points today are summarized nicely by the central imperative in each section.

First, “Be reconciled to God” – (v20)

in other words, there is *nothing* that you can do to make reconciliation happen with God.

Simply *be* reconciled to God.

Second, “Do not receive the grace of God in vain” (v1)

The fact that salvation is all of grace does not mean that you have no responsibility!

You are called to respond.

What is that response?

Third, “Widen your hearts” (v13).

Because of what God has done in Jesus.

Because salvation is the work of God’s grace.

Therefore, open your hearts to one another – do not be afraid!

This can be hard.

We live in a broken world.

We are broken people – who live in broken relationships.

I often tell people that every family at MCPC is a dysfunctional family –
every marriage is a troubled marriage.

One time, Ginger and I were talking about some of our struggles.

Someone replied, “Oh, that’s so great that you’ve worked through these things –
and look at you now!”

We said, “Actually we are describing the conversation we were having
five minutes before we arrived at your house!”

Yes, our marriage is *far* stronger than it was 15 years ago.

(You couldn’t pay me enough to go back to the way I was back then!)

But for every step of growth in grace –

we see three more that we need to make next!

When Paul talks about the ministry of *reconciliation* in chapter 5,

he is talking about how reconciliation with God

should affect reconciliation with everyone and everything else.

1. Be Reconciled to God (5:18-21)

a. “God in Christ” – the Work of Reconciliation (v16-19)

¹⁶ *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.* ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*^[b] *The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.* ¹⁸ *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;* ¹⁹ *that is, in Christ God was reconciling*^[c] *the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*

As we saw last time, verses 16-19 show us the pattern:

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.

The work of reconciliation is the work of God.

God has reconciled us to himself *through Christ*.

The death and resurrection of Christ is the act whereby God has reconciled us.

This reminds us that *only God* can save.

We distinguish between the *accomplishment* of redemption,
and the *application* of redemption.

Jesus *accomplished* our redemption on the cross –

and in his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father.

But what Jesus *accomplished* on the cross

is only *applied* to us by his Holy Spirit.

Think of it this way,

Saul of Tarsus was undoubtedly alive when Jesus died on the cross.

But Saul of Tarsus (whom we now call Paul the apostle)
was an unbeliever.

Was *Paul* saved when Jesus died on the cross?

No.

Paul remained hostile to Jesus for *years* after the resurrection.

In Christ God reconciled the world to himself,
not counting their trespasses against them,
but until the Spirit *applies* the work of Christ,
we are not *actually* reconciled.

That's why Paul goes on to speak about the application of redemption in verses 20-21.

b. "God through Us" – the Preacher as Ambassador for Christ (v20-21)

²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

God was in Christ reconciling the world.

That's speaking of redemption accomplished.

But God makes his appeal through the ministry of the word – through the ministry of preaching – that's redemption *applied*.

God was in Christ – and he makes his appeal through us.

Too many preachers have forgotten that they are ambassadors of the King.

What is the purpose of preaching?

Verse 20 sets forth the basic purpose of preaching.

"We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

The task of the preacher is not primarily a matter of instruction – but appeal.

The ambassador is a messenger sent by the King –

but he is more than just a messenger.

The ambassador is sent as an emissary who brings a message,

but the message calls for an action.

The ambassador does not just explain who the king is.

The ambassador is sent from the king to a foreign land

in order to call that foreign land to respond in a particular way to the king.

God makes his appeal through his ambassadors – through gospel ministers.

This also means that gospel ministers are not free to add their own message to that of Jesus.
Our calling is to proclaim the message of King Jesus.
Our task is to teach the whole counsel of God –
to preach the gospel of the kingdom
(to use Paul’s language from Acts 20).

As our catechism summarizes Paul’s point here:
“The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the word,
an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners,
and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.”

King Jesus says that this is what you need to hear.
This forms the foundation for what Paul is doing in chapter 6 –
because the message of reconciliation begins with *Jesus* and what he did:

²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Here, in verse 21, you see clearly a twofold exchange:
we were sinful – but for our sake God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin;
he was righteous – and in him we now become the righteousness of God.

In verse 19, Paul said that God did not “count their trespasses against them.”
Instead, God counted their trespasses against Jesus.
On the cross, Jesus bore our sins.

Isaiah 53:4-6 is very much in the background in verse 21.
“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

And again, the result in verse 21 is also found in Isaiah 53:11
“Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.”

Jesus is the righteous one, the servant of the LORD who makes many to be accounted righteous.

And this is what prompts Paul’s exhortation in verses 1-2 of chapter 6:

2. Do Not Receive the Grace of God in Vain (6:1-2)

6:1 Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

Paul sees himself and his fellow-preachers as “working together with Christ.”

But working at what?

Not the accomplishment of redemption –
that is what God did *in Christ*.

Rather, we work together with Christ – in the *application* of redemption.

Because the Spirit of God makes the reading – but especially the preaching of the Word –
an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners...

And this is what gives to Paul – and all preachers – their confidence:

“we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.”

How could someone receive the grace of God in vain?

Well, think about Jesus’ parable of the seed and the soils in Matthew 13.

The sower goes out to sow.

Jesus says that this refers to the preacher who is preaching the word of God.

Some of the seed falls on the path –
some of those who listen to sermons have hard hearts,
and the word simply bounces off them.

They receive *nothing*.

Some of the seed falls on the rocky soil
and the seed sprouts quickly,
but because it has no root, it withers and dies.

These, Jesus says, are those who receive the word with joy –
in other words, they *receive the grace of God*
that comes in the preaching of the word.

But they have no root – they do not have the Spirit’s work in their heart –
and so when trouble or persecution comes,
they fall away.

That is what it means to “receive the grace of God in vain.”

Simon Magus, in Acts 8, would be an excellent example
of someone who *believed* – who “received the word with joy” –
but who lacked the *root* – and thus fell away.

But just as Jesus goes on to say that the good soil refers to those

who hear the word, and bear fruit,

so also Paul urges the Corinthians to *bear fruit* in response to the word.

How do you know that you are good soil?

How do you know that you are not receiving the grace of God in vain?

Well, how do you respond to the preaching of the Word?

Are *you* bearing fruit?

Are you *doing* what God says in his word?

And in verse 2, Paul quotes from Isaiah 49:8

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.*

All that Isaiah had said about the coming eschatological salvation
has happened in Jesus.
The favorable time is *now*.
The day of salvation is *now*.

3. Widen Your Hearts (6:3-13)

Verses 3-13 then turn to one of the most intimate descriptions of Paul’s life we ever see.
Paul has just been talking about the nature and purpose of *preaching*.
And then he says in verse 3:

a. Paul, Silas, and Timothy and the Pattern of the Ministry (v3-10)
³ *We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,* ⁴ *but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:*

If a modern pastor were to start a sentence this way,
he would then go on to talk about how hard he works on his sermons –
trying to make sure that his sermons are accessible –
so that he puts no obstacle in the way of people understanding his sermons.

In other words, we tend to focus on the *content* of the pastor’s sermon.
But Paul says that we should instead focus on the *content* of the pastor’s life.
Or, more precisely, on the content of the *elders’* lives –
or, even better on the eldership’s life!

Because Paul is not talking about *himself* (singular),
or himself and his fellow ministers (plural),
but the ministry (singular) *of us* (plural).

The word translated “ministry” in verse 3 is diakonia.
And the word translated “servants” in verse 4 is diakonos.
The *one* ministry of Paul and his fellow-ministers is characterized and commended
by the remarkable pattern of life that takes the *cross* as its model.
What Isaiah 53 said about the suffering servant was true first of Jesus –
and then of those who follow Jesus in making disciples of the nations.

And Paul starts with the *circumstances* of the ministry in verses 4-5:

by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities,⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;

Compared to Paul and his traveling presbytery
we've had it really easy at MCPC!

We've had a few hardships, some labors, and a few sleepless nights –
but no beatings, imprisonments, riots, or times of hunger.

But the general description in verse 4 applies to us – as to all churches of Jesus Christ!
If you think of the last three words used in verse 5,
“hard work, sleeplessness, and hunger” –
you see “the depletion of physical resources that happens”
when you pour yourselves out in ministry.

The crucial thing is that we do this *together* with and in Christ.

In all of the book of Acts you only ever see Paul by himself for a few days in Athens.
Christian ministry is *always* a corporate ministry.

And in verses 6-7, Paul talks about the *ways and means* by which this ministry is conducted:

Verse 6 starts with the ways – the manner in which – the ministry is conducted:

⁶ *by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness,*

Christian ministry should be conducted with purity –
chaste devotion to Christ –
purity of behavior and motive (sincerity).

And knowledge –
if you do not know the scriptures – and the human heart –
then you cannot minister effectively.
Christian ministry must *always* be characterized by *knowledge*.

Likewise, patience!

Even as God has been patient with us – even so must we be slow to anger,
and quick to be reconciled with others.

And kindness – showing forth the steadfast love of God toward us.

But then in the rest of verse 6 and 7, we see the *means* by which the ministry is conducted:

the Holy Spirit, genuine love;⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God;

The Holy Spirit winds up at the center of this list –
but at the beginning of the list of the *means* that we use in the ministry!

This is an important reminder that *we* do not change anyone!
As Paul works through a list of the means we use in ministry,
he reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the *one* who changes people.

But dependent upon the Spirit,
there are three particular means that we use:
First is *genuine love* – love that is not hypocritical – love that is sincere.
Notice that Paul puts this among the *means* – not the manner.
Purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness are all characteristics of the ministers.
Genuine love is a means – an instrument.
Love changes people – not by itself – but by the Holy Spirit.
Second is *truthful speech* – perhaps better translated “the word of truth.”
The word of truth – preaching – changes people –
again, not by itself, but by the Holy Spirit.
Third is the *power of God*.
Back in 4:7 Paul said that “we have this treasure in jars of clay,
to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”
“The frailty of human experience manifests God’s power.” (Guthrie, 331)

In our weakness, God displays his mighty power –
so that *by his Holy Spirit* he changes people.

At the end of verse 7, Paul uses a phrase that may sound a little odd to us:
with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;

In one sense, this continues the instruments of ministry,
but by using a different preposition, Paul signals a shift here.

There may be some parallel to Ephesians 6 – and the armor of God –
but this one brief phrase only tells us that Paul and his colleagues
are well-equipped for spiritual ministry.
Weapons of righteousness for the right and for the left
simply means that God has amply provided us
with all that we need for the ministry that he has given us!

And then he describes the *back and forth* nature of the ministry in nine contrasts in verses 8-10:

⁸ *through honor and dishonor,*
It’s worth noting that Paul uses the word usually translated “glory,”
contrasted with the word “dishonor” –
so through glory and dishonor.
And the second is like it:
through slander and praise.

Paul’s point here is that it really doesn’t matter to them what others say about their ministry.

Whether we are slandered or praised doesn't make a difference.
Whether we receive glory or dishonor from men is irrelevant.
We are ambassadors for Christ.
We will have to give account *to him* for our ministry.
Therefore what others may say doesn't matter.

Now, the last seven items (from the end of v8 to v10)
contrast our present experience with the eschatological reality.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;

The word "planoi" is the word from which we get our word "planet" –
which refers to "wandering" or deceiving.
The planets are called "wandering stars" because they move in erratic ways.
Even so Paul and his traveling presbytery may be treated as "wanderers" –
as impostors – but in fact, they are true to the calling of God in Jesus Christ.

⁹ *as unknown, and yet well known;*

We may be obscure in the eyes of the world –
in the eyes of those who deem themselves important –
but that is what matters!
As ambassadors of Christ we represent the Lord of lords and King of kings.
Do not judge according to outward appearance!

The next two echo Psalm 118:17-18

"I shall not die but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.
In disciplining the Lord disciplined me, and to death he did not surrender me."

as dying, and behold, we live;

as punished [or disciplined], and yet not killed;

We are always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus,
in order that the life of the Lord Jesus might be manifested in our mortal flesh.

¹⁰ *as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;*

I want you to pay attention to how Paul says this.
The second half does not negate the first!
"as dying, and behold we live" – 'we live' does not negate the dying!
In the same way, the rejoicing does not negate the sorrow!
We keep seeing this in 2 Corinthians.
The pattern of cross-and-resurrection is the shape of the Christian life.
This present affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory.
Sorrow – affliction – hardship – in short, the *cross*
is precisely the path that God has chosen for us to walk,
so that we might follow Jesus into eternal life.

And *that* is why Paul is always rejoicing!

We always rejoice *not* because we are living our best life now!

But because we know that these deep sorrows and afflictions
are not the end of the story!
If anyone is in Christ – there is a new creation!

And so, while we may be poor,
as poor, yet making many rich;

Paul lacked financial resources, but he is the source of making many rich –
not in money, but in spiritual abundance.

This would be Paul's answer to the "prosperity preachers" of our day:

as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

As C. S. Lewis put it, "He who has God and everything else
has no more than he who has God only." (quoted in Guthrie, 339)

These seven contrasts all focus on what it means to walk by faith, not by sight.

So, put all this together – what do you have?

You have a ministry that is characterized by suffering.

You have a ministry that is characterized by integrity.

You have a ministry that is oriented to the resurrection of Jesus –
but only by the way of the cross.

And so Paul turns to the Corinthians and says in verses 11-13 that the problem here
is not with us – but with you!

b. The Problem Is Found in Your Own Affections (v11-13)

¹¹ *We have spoken freely to you,^[d] 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.*

I've been wrestling with this passage for the last several weeks.

I knew it was coming – and I knew that I'd have to preach it –
so I've been working through it regularly.

I have a tendency to second-guess myself.

If I were writing 2 Corinthians,
it would be very different.

I would be far more tentative – far less confident than Paul!

I see my own flaws – how I tend to be passive –
how I tend to be afraid and uncertain about what is the right thing to say or do.

You know how this works.

You've seen it in your relationships!

You want to love God and neighbor –

but something always seems to interfere:

Selfishness – pride – fear.

Yesterday, at the church work day, one of my jobs
was to work through several boxes of papers from MCPC's history – from 1993-2002 –
before my time here.

It's a story of conflict within the session.

Every side (and sometimes there were more than two sides!)
was convinced that they were right – and that others were wrong.
Just from reading the letters, it would be very difficult to choose sides!
Everyone makes such a good case!
(and often with plenty of quotes from the Bible and the Church Order!).
Everyone defends his own ministry – showing why he is in the right,
and how the others are in the wrong.

At first blush, it sure sounds like they are echoing Paul:

“You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.”
We are not the problem – *you are!*

I am grateful to God that over the last 15 years

we have *never* come anywhere close to the conflict of MCPC's first decade!

But the problem of church conflict is nothing new.

Paul was dealing with a church conflict in Corinth –
a conflict that centered on *him* and his ministry.

And it sure sounds like Paul is saying, “We are not the problem – you are!”

It would be easy to say, “Well, Paul is inspired by the Holy Spirit, so he can say this!”

Certainly, the fact that Paul is inspired by the Holy Spirit
gives me great confidence that we can trust Paul on this point!
But I am far more interested in the question of *why* is Paul right?
Because we all have a tendency to be defensive – to claim that we are in the right.
How do we know?

Why is Paul right?

Indeed, the more I dig into 2 Corinthians,

the more clearly I see how *I cannot claim* to be right in the way that Paul does.
And *you* (singular) cannot claim to be right in the way that Paul does.

Because Paul (singular) does not claim to be right.

His confidence is rooted in the fact that multiple eyes have looked at the situation.

Paul and Silas and Timothy, in consultation with Titus and others,
are convinced that they understand the real problem.

And the real problem in Corinth is that the Corinthians are *restricted* in their affections.

Paul and his colleagues have poured out their lives to the Corinthians,
and in response, the Corinthians have shut down – and shut them out.

It's certainly possible that a group can have blinders on –
and a group can be wrong (of course!).

But when you have a group that is characterized by the sort of openness, sincerity, and integrity
that Paul describes here in chapter 6 –
then the group will be open to voices speaking into the situation.

This is something that we've worked on over the years.

Back in 2004 we worked through questions of worship and preaching
and we came up with the session study papers
that have continued to guide and shape our corporate worship.

But it's something that we have to work on *continually* –
it's like marriage – as soon as you think you've got things figured out,
you start taking each other for granted!

In the same way, in the church, *open communication* is key.

As Paul says, "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open...
In return, widen your hearts also."

We will never be able to "prevent" church crises from happening.

Calamities and stressful situations have happened and will continue to happen.

So long as there are sinners in this church (and as a good Calvinist,
I would affirm that that will be the case until our Lord returns!)
we will continue to "bump into each other" from time to time.

The point is not that we will never bump into each other!

The point is to keep our hearts *open* to one another.

Widen your hearts!

"But I'm afraid that you will hurt me."

Yes, I will – just like you will hurt me.

But we *cannot* close our hearts to one another!

We *cannot* be restricted in our affections!

So, how do we do this?

It requires us to be connected –
to love God and love one another.

It requires us to be *yoked* to one another in our day-to-day lives.

Why do I say that?

Because verse 14 says "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers."

We'll come back to this next week –
but verse 14 is *not* talking about marriage!
Certainly it *applies* to marriage –
but Paul is talking about *all* of daily life.
Who are the people with whom you are *yoked*?
Who are the people with whom your life is bound?

To whom is your heart and life open?

If you have been reconciled to God by Jesus Christ,
then your heart and life need to be open to the people of Jesus.