2 Corinthians 6:1-10

Paul’s God Directed Ministry

1 And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain-- 2 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"-- 3 giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, 4 but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, 5 in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, 6 in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, 7 in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, 8 by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; 9 as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, 10 as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

After the mountain peak verses of 5:20-21 Paul circles back around to repeated defense of his ministry and concerns for the proper establishing of the church in Corinth. This is a pattern that he started in chapter 1 [vs. 5-11] and has continued consistently to defend his ministry and sharing of the gospel through the trials of their missionary journey – as part of his reason for not visiting a second time [v1:15] – so that the church would not take umbrage and stop being a light for petty reasons. This passage, while looking long, is set up to restate Paul’s context for ministry on the road.

# God’s Grace in Vain?

## Working Together with Him

In 5:20 Paul emphasizes that the church in Corinth had strayed from a heavenly mindset and the commission that Paul had left with them to establish and grow the church there in unity [for example: 1 Corinthians 1:4-11]. Paul is reminding them about he and his cohort’s mission as servants to establish and build the church wherever they are. They were working with the Father and His direction in their ministry to present this corrective message to the church in Corinth.

As recipients of the letter the church should have by now been convinced, but Paul’s belaboring of the trials and ministry purpose reaffirm what was a clear message to a stubborn body.

*If we read this letter and look at our own lives do we sometimes find the same stubbornness and expectation of our own desires?*

## Empty Results in Corinth

The Grace of God being received in Corinth was not in question in this verse. The believers in Corinth were genuine and saved [1 Corinthians 1:6]. The established efforts of Paul could have planted a church that never matured past carnality and infighting, selfishness and a generally non-abiding state could have been a potential outcome and the body would have been established in vain. The word translated *vain* here carries with it the idea of being empty or devoid of value. After visiting Corinth during two missionary journeys [2nd and 3rd] having spent that much energy to have only a single generation’s effect in Corinth would have been troubling.

### The Acceptable Time

To re-enforce this concept of urging Paul quotes a small part of Isaiah 49:8. Hermeneutically speaking it is important to understand that Paul is only quoting a sub-piece of the larger passage that is about the emergence of the gospel through Christ to reach all of the nations – only they didn’t know that at the time of the writing of the prophecy.

*What made the time the acceptable/right time?*

God’s timing is perfect and as author of the time-space continuum He knew precisely when His Son should come. It was a time when the roads and transportation were unprecedented. The unified Mediterranean governance and Koine Greek adoption allowed for the gospel to be articulated clearly, carried quickly, and understood clearly. The Hebrew diaspora would allow for the immediate understanding of Christ’s fulfilling of the prophecies and establishing of gatherings of believers across Rome.

The message of the gospel was to the whole world and the Corinthians were the recipients of that message. They were part of God’s plan and perfect timing.

## Empty, Discredited, Results for Paul

Paul worked with those the Lord brought into his life to establish churches, check on churches, and to maintain a complex ministry across the Mediterranean and wanted to make sure that as an apostle he did not stand before the Lord having established nothing but a compendium of letters. Paul worked to not offend anyone through cultural or social scenarios – only through the gospel – and that was to the end of having a credible ministry. The church in Corinth appears to have charged Paul of not only being a lesser apostle [1 Corinthians 3:4], but of being unreliable, and that was clearly not Paul’s intent (as the testimony of this letter so heavily reinforces).

# In Everything Servants of God

## Paul’s Circumstances & Ministry Trials

As we delve into the second half of this lesson’s passage we need to remember that Paul has been covering these issues from his missionary journey with repetition as emphasis. It’s easy for there to be a sense of, “we get it,” that makes it harder to understand, but as modern readers we tend to have a deep appreciation for Paul and the doctrines he shared in his epistles. We understand position and condition, we understand who he was. The readers in Corinth may not have been so aware. In verses 4 and 5 Paul sets up a list of events and then abiding qualities in 6 and 7, followed by circumstances framed biblically in verses 8, 9 and 10. While it might be easy to say that Paul was repeating himself, this progression offers insight into his thinking process and we benefit from seeing his thoughtful thinking.

## Servants of God

Continuing the ministry language from the previous verses Paul roots the next set of ideas in their service of God. His purpose was to represent God as an ambassador in an attempt to draw people to Jesus with the gospel at whatever the cost wherever the Holy Spirit led him [Colossians 1:25]. This was followed by the ever-so-critical step of equipping the churches so that they could be established in Christ.

When we think about being servants of God we recognize the sacrificial starting point that that demands. It demands thinking like Galatians 2:20: that we are alive in Christ alone and we reckon the fleshly desires dead. As you read these lists from Paul think upon the way that an abiding believer would view these circumstances.

### Servants in Trials

#### In Endurance, Affliction, Hardships, Distresses, Beatings, Imprisonments, Tumults, Labors, Sleeplessness and Hunger

Paul’s language structure puts an ‘in’ before each one of these difficulties – each one he was a servant in. These sorts of trials would be seen as things to be avoided by the average person. They’re against self-preservation in some cases, they’re definitely difficult to see others go through that are in leadership positions. The Jews who had embraced the unbiblical view that difficulties meant that someone was being cursed by God would have wrestled with this – and Paul was calling them out on this. They had to be confronted by the truth that God might send His people into difficulties; they had to be confronted by truth.

American culture tends towards a greater level of empathy and sympathy than many other cultures. If the Corinthian culture heard about these things there might have been more apathy because they were tending towards seeking their own. It is worth nothing

### Servants in Abiding

#### In Purity, Knowledge, Patience, Kindness, the Holy Spirit, Genuine Love, the Word of Truth, the Power of God; By Weapons of Righteousness in the Right and Left Hands

Despite Paul’s circumstances and the events that would lead some to carnal reaction, his response in ministry was Holy Spirit led. Paul responded by the Holy Spirit with love, truth and power.

#### The Fruit of the Spirit

We see Paul’s list includes at least a subset of the Fruit of the Spirit as well as calling out that He was in the Spirit. As an apostle we don’t find that shocking, but it seems like the church in Corinth wanted the gifts for miraculous church gatherings, but didn’t see fit to understand the Holy Spirit’s work during the rest of the 166 or so hours of the week.

*Why doesn’t Paul mention the gifts of the Spirit here in this passage?*

#### Genuine Love

Love gets its very definition in God. God *is* Love [1 John 4:8]. Paul manifested the love of God in a very authentic, genuine way. Secular versions of love are merited, and often kindness is expressed out of compulsion, but genuine love draws people in. Paul loved those he preached to, even if they would hate him back.

John wrote, “Beloved, let us love one another,” and in the Corinthian church that seems to have been something they didn’t understand as their love for Paul was weak or non-existent in parts of the body. Paul loved them anyway. He had already chastised the church in 1 Corinthians 13 about needing to understand genuine love. It appears they didn’t understand his message.

#### The Word of Truth

Paul was gifted as an apostle to speak the truth of God and reveal through teaching and writing what God intended for the church to understand for their spiritual growth and edification. Given the division that was so prominent in Judaism Christ stood out as able to teach truth where other teachers were uncertain or had an agenda. Paul, similarly, was able to come in and speak undeniable truth to those he preached to. All of this truth rooted in love.

#### God’s Power

While we are not apostles and should not expect to be empowered to constantly heal and do the miraculous, Paul was enabled many times by the Holy Spirit to do and speak and live by the Power of God. This was God’s seal on Paul’s life to prove the veracity of His ministry through Paul. The church in Corinth was eager to see the power of God manifested when it made them look good, but denied any of the other places in their life for it to be manifested.

### Servants in Extremes

#### By Glory & Dishonor, Evil & Good Reports, Deceivers yet Truth, Unknown & Well-known, Dying yet Living, Punished yet not Killed, Sorrowful yet Rejoicing, As Poor yet Making Many Rich, Having Nothing yet Possessing All Things

As Paul puts together this list of extremes it’s easy to get distracted by the sheer size of the list and forget that these were scenarios that he was himself facing as either hindrances or slanderous things that he was having to surmount as he traveled. If your day-to-day job faced these sorts of things you might feel beaten down. Paul is framing things in light of what God was leading him in.

*What is the teaching use of these contrasts verses some of his earlier list?*

Paul has already covered some of these ideas earlier (2 Corinthians 4:8-12), and will cover them again. His shift in his list from just expounding on scenarios of ministry into attitudes of ministry, leads to the contrasts of ministry.

#### Glory and Dishonor

Paul is not talking about God’s glory in this case, but about the reputation and reactions that he faced. In some cases, like with the Bereans, he was honored because he taught rightly. In other cases, like with the Galatians and Corinthians there was much disagreement about Paul and he was dishonored by some in the body. Paul’s reputation was not his motive – Christ was.

#### Evil and Good Reports

In Acts we see tumultuous scenarios rooted in false reports such as in chapter 21:27-30 where people were stirring up crowds and reporting things about Paul. In other cases like Acts 14:27 we find that there were reports within the body of what God was doing in their ministry. Paul didn’t care, his motive was Christ, it wasn’t about him.

#### Poor and yet Possessing All Things

Paul had very little possessions of an earthly sort, but he knew for certain that God would supply all of his needs (Philippians 4:18-19). The idea that need is not God’s opportunity is something the flesh holds to, but Paul understood that need was God’s plan for provision.

# Conclusion

Paul was trying to restore the church in Corinth to a right way of thinking rooted in God’s sovereignty and resting in their fellowship with Jesus Christ. His personal illustrations were given to help bolster their understanding of why he was not going to be returning during this journey through Corinth. If the church in Corinth was unable to understand these things then they would be drawn back into the carnal ways of the culture surrounding them and dissolve back into a culture that would not recognize them as Christians.

## Other Churches Responses

Paul’s writing to the Corinthians in this letter will bring up these issues again, showing a concern Paul had for their immaturity and inability to understand with compassion. However, in Philippians 1:12-18 we read about how there were Christians of all stripes who preached the gospel because Paul was imprisoned, but no matter what their motivation Paul was pleased that the gospel was preached. Not all churches saw the trials and suffering and Spirit led ministry with such selfishness.

We should be challenged to consider these things in our own lives: do we see others ministry and separate ourselves from them or join in support and prayer?