Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Honor and Dishonor--The Paradox of Ministry, Part 1
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:1-2
Code: 47-40

Well let's open our Bibles this morning to 2 Corinthians chapter 6. We are coming to a wonderful chapter, this sixth chapter of 2 Corinthians is going to open up all kinds of insights into the heart of Paul, as the other chapters have, into the nature of ministry, into his perspective in dealing with a difficult church. But for this morning and at least next week also, we're going to be looking at chapter 6 verses 1 through 10 which I've titled, "Honor and Dishonor--The Paradox of Ministry, Honor and Dishonor--The Paradox of Ministry."

It is not unusual, frankly, for the preacher to be the most loved and the most hated man in his community. To those who hear him and believe what he preaches, he is the spiritual hero, the spiritual father, the mentor, the teacher, the voice of God, the bearer of truth, the bringer of encouragement, the source of hope, the fountain of joy and blessing because he proclaims God's Word. But to those who refuse to hear and those who refuse to believe, he is a voice of conviction, he is a voice of irritation, he is a voice of agitation, he is a troubler, he is an intruder into the tranquility of their shame. He is the fountain of lies. He is judgmental because he proclaims the Word of God.

It was exactly the same way with the Lord Jesus Christ. Never was a man more loved, never was a man more adored and never was a man more hated and never was a man more despised. Some fell at His feet and kissed them and washed them with their tears. Some bowed to Him in absolute awe and total worship and abandoned love. Some acknowledged Him as the one who fulfilled all their hopes and all their dreams and all their desires for time and eternity. They saw Him as the source of blessedness forever...love, joy and peace personified. Others spit on Him, mocked Him, screamed for His blood in vitriol and hate, assessed Him as an enemy of their tranquility, an enemy of their religion, an enemy of their peace, a disturber, a source of conflict who needed to be executed.

And Jesus said, "A disciple should not expect to be above His teacher." If He was treated in such diametrically opposite ways, so will His representatives be treated. In the fifteenth chapter of John Jesus lays out some of this beginning in verse 18. He says, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you are of the world...verse 19 says...the world would love its own, but because you are not of the world but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, a slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My Word, they will keep yours also." And that's how it is in the ministry, to be the most loved and the most hated, the most honored and the most dishonored.

And that's the sense in which we come to the sixth chapter of 2 Corinthians because in these verses we are going to come face to face with the honor and dishonor of ministry. We, all of us, not just preachers, have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Back in chapter 5, notice verse 18, at the end of the verse it says that God gave us the ministry of reconciliation. At the end of verse 19, He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. And then verse 20, "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ." We are all then given the responsibility to tell the world the gospel. We are to tell them, first of all, that they are alienated from God, that they are dead in trespasses and sins and that there is only one way to heaven, there is only one way to forgiveness, there is only one hope and that is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again to provide salvation and forgiveness.

So we are to tell people about their alienation from God. We are to confront that alienation. And then we are to tell them about the possibility of reconciliation. That's what we do as Christ's ambassadors. And those who hear us will be divided into two categories. Some who believe will love us and some who reject will despise us. We literally stand in the place of Jesus Christ. We stand there as His representatives. And we are to some an aroma of life to life, as he put it back in chapter 2 verse 16, and to others we are an aroma of death to death. To some we are a perfume, to others we are a stench. That's how it is. We cannot expect popularity with everyone if we have integrity with regard to the message we are committed to proclaim. Honor and dishonor is our lot. To be adored and despised is our expectation. We will have people who will count us their dearest treasure and people who will do everything they can to destroy us.

I am the same person at Grace Church that you read about in the L.A. Times. It's just two different perspectives. To you I am the servant of God who brings the Word of God for which you are grateful. To the people who write for the Times, I am a bashing, blasting, diatribing person who is narrow minded and ought to be silenced. And I have been answering some interesting letters in response to the article that appeared a few weeks ago.

It doesn't surprise me. In fact, it somewhat encourages me that the message is clear enough to create the conflict. You don't seek the conflict but you do seek the clarity.

Those who serve Christ have the most profound blessing. And at the same time suffer the most severe disappointment. And so it's very true that the preacher is a sad/happy person. I understand how it is that Paul can say, "Rejoice always, and again I say rejoice," turn right around and say, "I have continual sorrow and heaviness of heart." I know what it is to rejoice always with continual joy over the positive response to the truth. And I also know what it is to sorrow always with continual heaviness of heart over the negative response to the truth. And that not only among unbelievers but among believers as well. We are at once then preachers, the world's happiest and the world's saddest creatures.

And certainly Paul was in the center of those colliding realities as he wrote this letter. He loved the Corinthians. His heart was filled with joy because many of them had believed the gospel and they had been granted tremendous gifts from God so that they came behind in no gift. The power of the Holy Spirit was upon their assembly and their fellowship. And there was a love bond between them that caused joy in his heart. But at the very same time, he looked at the Corinthians, saw the tremendous plethora of iniquities among them chronicled in the first letter he wrote them, saw their ready defection away from the truth when they followed the false teachers. And his heart was so full of grief he couldn't brush away the tears.

That's how it is in ministry. The cause is so great, the people are so valuable that you literally run to the extremes of emotion. When the cause moves forward, the joy is unbounded. When it is halted, the sorrow is profound. When people respond, it is joy unspeakable. When they don't, it is disappointment beyond measure because the issues at stake are so great. You might say to your child sometime as they're growing up in life, "I'm sorry you didn't go to this school, I'm sorry you didn't take that job. I'm sorry you didn't do that because I think it would have been better had you done this." But that pales when you...when you consider the sadness of the preacher who looks at people who reject divine truth. Therein lies the sadness. On the other hand, therein lies the joy when people respond.

And so, in the Corinthian church the apostle Paul was...was seeing both the joy and sorrow manifest at its highest and lowest level. Like all faithful ambassadors of Jesus Christ, he rejoices in the honor of his call. But his broken heart never mends and his tears never dry over the way people do not respond appropriately to the truth that he so passionately preached. And that is true in the church. In fact, in some ways it's even worse in the church.

People have asked me through the years, "What is the saddest part of the ministry?" And my sort of knee-jerk reaction answer is not to say when unbelieving people don't respond to the truth. My reaction is always to say, when believers don't respond to the truth. Those who have the Holy Spirit, those who understand the import of it, those who possess the Scripture, those who know the blessing bound up in it and don't obey. That is the profoundest disappointment and the greatest mystery to me.

Forgive the preacher if he is not able to rise above a sort of lingering sorrow to share a trivial joy. And forgive the preacher if he is unable to be depressed by a passing trial. He is really consumed with much weightier issues and so ought all of us to be. And part of sustaining your life in the ministry is managing to keep some equilibrium, to find some balance.

Now this tension and this balance between honor and dishonor, between joy and sorrow is nowhere better expressed than in this text. Here is the Holy Spirit's inspired description of the paradox of ministry. Let me read these ten verses to you, you'll see it.

"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--giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God; in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, and in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God, by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, 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."

Isn't that a powerful text? I mean, that's the nature of life for any faithful ambassador of Christ. That's how it is. That's the description of the paradox of ministry. And like the Apostle Paul, any preacher, any Christian who is a faithful ambassador proclaiming reconciliation to God for sinners who believe the gospel is going to understand this kind of perspective.

Now as we look at this text I want to divide it into four very important aspects. A loyal, effective ambassador of Christ will view his labor in four ways. There are four sort of senses that motivate, that are underneath any of us who serve Christ, four perspectives. And Paul gives them to us here.

First of all, he viewed this paradoxical life as privilege. His first sense was a sense of privilege. Secondly, his second sense was a sense of passion, or you might even call it persistence, take your choice. Thirdly there was a sense of protection. And fourthly, there was the overwhelming realization of paradox. And those are the four things that you see that make up Paul's perspective as he looks at himself as an ambassador, and as he defines it for all of us. And you really need to live with all four of those. If you're going to be effective in ministry, you've got to understand the privilege involved, the passion involved, the protection required and the paradox that is inevitable.

Let's start with the first one, and maybe we'll do the first two and maybe I'll have time to introduce the third one to you. The first one is privilege. Because ministry is so paradoxical, because is relentlessly so painful, because there is so much disappointment in it, because there is such hostility to face, because there is so much...as Paul would put it here...endurance, affliction, hardship, distress, labor and all of that, and relatively small amount for us compared to him, but because it is filled with things like dishonor and evil report and being thought of as a deceiver and being misrepresented and being sorrowful and all of that, because that's a part of ministry, you must understand the privilege of it or you will succumb to the difficulties. And that privilege is given to us in the first statement of verse 1.

Paul starts by saying, "And working together with Him we also urge you...and working together with Him." Here is the high point of all perspective. We need to understand the dignity of our work, we need to understand the honor of our work. We need to understand that we have been given a high and holy privilege that is exceedingly beyond what we could ever hope for. And we begin to understand that when we read, "Working together with Him." If we understand that we are involved in a cooperative effort with the living God, that changes everything...that changes everything.

Marshal Petane(?) pronounced over fallen France these words, "Our spirit of enjoyment was stronger than our spirit of sacrifice. We wanted to have more than we wanted to give, we tried to spare effort and met disaster." And I think he got something that has a spiritual overtone. Many Christians really are more concerned with what they get than what they give. The cause of Christ languishes in a wounded world for lack of valiant dedicated workers who I think wouldn't be that way if they just had a small glimpse of what it means to work with God.

I hear people occasionally say to me, "You know, I'm privileged, I got a fellowship at a certain university and I get to work with such-and-such a professor." "I got an internship at a certain hospital and I get to work alongside a certain physician." "I got a job in a certain field and I get to work alongside a man who is respected and gifted in that field." Nothing like that even comes close to comparing what it is to work together with God. I really think laziness and indifference in ministry, indolence, a failure to set your priorities and to pour your life into this glorious opportunity to preach the message of reconciliation and to build up the saints in order to do that. I really believe that that begins with a failure to understand the level of privilege to which you have been called. You are working together with the Almighty, called and gifted and empowered and placed in a strategic location to serve Him with the promise of eternal reward and the promise, "Lo, I am with you always."

You'll notice there in that text that "with Him" is in italics. That means that it does not appear in all the manuscripts in the original. It has been supplied by the translators because it belongs there. The reason we know it belongs there is because it is carried over from chapter 5 verses 19 and 20. If you go back to verse 19 it says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world and He has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation." And then verse 20, "We are ambassadors for Christ but it is God entreating through us." Do you see that? It is God who worked through Christ to produce the possibility of reconciliation. It is God who works through us to preach the reality of reconciliation. It is God working through us. That's why the translators put it there. It is working together with Him, it is He working through us. And that in itself, we like to celebrate the glories and the wonders of the incarnation, and we talk about how incredible it is that the second member of the trinity would consider Himself humbled, to stoop and not hold on to what He had a right to hold on to, turn His back on the glories of being pros ton theon, face to face with God, come into the world, take upon Himself the form of a servant, being found in fashion as a man, humbled Himself to death, even the death of the cross. All that's in Philippians 2. It's astonishing to us that the eternal second member of

the trinity, God a very God, perfectly holy, would stoop to that level. But it is an incarnation of a king to realize that God comes to dwell in us. And when you come to faith in Jesus Christ, God comes in the form of His Spirit, takes up residence in your heart and now you become a coworker with God.

There are some people who would work very diligently if they were working with the person they most esteem in this world. And they will not work diligently when they are a coworker with the God of all glory who has stooped to dwell within them for the purpose of using them. Paul never lost sight of his privilege. What a privilege. If no one ever heard, if no one ever listened, if no one ever responded, just the privilege of working with God was enough. And if his ministry was a saver of life to life, so be it. It was a saver of death to death, so be it. In either case God was working through him to His own glory. That is the honor of the ministry. That is what sustains you when the going gets tough. That is what sustains you in the midst of the disappointments. It is the privilege of it all.

I can't leave this point alone, if you don't mind, and so I want to help enrich it a little bit by giving you some other Scriptures that bear on it. First Corinthians chapter 3 verse 9, you ought to underline this because this is a very general and clear statement. First Corinthians 3:9, "For we are God's fellow workers." I mean, that could not be stated any more clearly. You're not in it alone. God is there with you. Paul said in Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live yet not I but Christ lives in me." And he said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 6:17, "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit." And he said to them later on, "What? Know you not that your body is the temple of the Spirit of God which you have of God and you're not your own, you're bought with a price."

Also, in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 6, verse 4 says, "There are variety of gifts, there are varieties of ministries." But verse 6 says, "There are varieties of effects or results, but the same God who works all things in all persons." I mean, that is just a tremendous truth. I mean, I don't know why you wouldn't want to give your whole life to this ministry to have the privilege of working together with God. And outside that which pertains to the Kingdom, you're not. You're just on your own.

Down in verse 11, "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills." God comes in the form of His Spirit and works in us and through us. Again in Ephesians chapter 1, Paul prays that we would know the surpassing greatness, verse 19, of God's power toward us who believe. Listen to this, "This power is in accord with the working of the strength of His might." It's in us.

Over, of course, in chapter 3 of Ephesians, he says in verse 7, "I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace given to me according to the working of His power." It was His power in Paul. Verse 20, "Now to him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think according to the power that works within us." What power? The power that raised Jesus from the dead, the power of the Almighty God.

In Philippians chapter 2 and verse 13, "It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Colossians chapter 1 verse 29, "And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power which mightily works within me." Paul worked, I mean he worked as hard as a man could work, but he worked with God working in him and through him. He was God's coworker. What a tremendous truth.

This truth permeates the ministry of the Apostles in the New Testament. The ministry that went on in the New Testament was really the ministry of God working through the Apostles. And when they came back in Acts 15 to report to the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Barnabas came back, this is what they said in chapter 15 verse 4, "They reported all that God had done with them." What a privilege.

The ministry may be paradoxical, it may be painful. It may have its ups and downs, its highs and lows, but what a privilege. What a privilege. In Hebrews 13:21 it says that it is God working in us that which is pleasing in His sight. I mean, that's the theme all the way through. Jesus said in John 15, "I am the vine, you are the...what?...branches, without Me you can...what?...you can bear no fruit." The life flows from Him. We are just coworkers with God. Folks, that's elevating us beyond what we deserve.

I love how the book of Mark ends. The last verse in the book of Mark, chapter 16 verse 20, "They went out and preached everywhere while the Lord worked with them." While the Lord worked with them. What great hope, what great encouragement, what great privilege does that bring to the heart of a faithful Christian. It is the Lord working with them.

Back in chapter 2 verse 14 of 2 Corinthians, Paul said, "Thanks be to God who always leads us in His triumph in Christ." God works with us and He works with us to win, to victory.

In Mark, let me just close with this, I have other Scriptures, but I need to keep going here. In Mark chapter 4 verse 26, "And He was saying, The Kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil and goes to bed at night and gets up by day and the seed sprouts up and grows. How? He himself doesn't know."

"The soil produces crops by itself, first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. And when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle because the harvest has come." Boy, what a picture that is. We sow and we sow and sow and we go to bed and we get up, and there's life and we don't know how. I mean, any faithful preacher, any faithful Christian is going to say to himself...I don't know how this happened, I don't know why what I do results in life except that I'm working together with God. I can throw the seed but only He can give the life. I can preach the truth, only He can generate that truth. First of all, as the parable says, into a blade and then a head, and then a mature grain. That's His work. That's the mystery and the wonder of ministry. And it is so

marvelous, it is so thrilling. It is beyond description when you serve the Lord and it comes back to you how lives have been transformed, how people have been changed, how the seed has been planted and new life has come. And you know it isn't you but you are a coworker with God and all you can do is throw the seed. And they mystery and the wonder of it is what God alone does.

How can anyone say no to such a privilege, no matter how difficult it is, no matter how straining it is? How can anyone say no to such a privilege? How can anyone turn his back on a ministry? How can anyone turn his back on a calling to preach or teach? How can anyone say no to that opportunity? And worse, how can anyone who has that opportunity forfeit that opportunity by sin? How can anyone be so foolish as to forfeit the privilege of being a coworker with God by sin?

I just want to work with Him and that means I need to work His way. I don't need to get too creative here cause I don't have the power anyway. Is that not true? God has the power, I just want to stay within the parameters of the power and that keeps me within the parameters of this book. I don't need to redefine ministry on some contemporary terms. I want God to work through me and God works and does all the work that will be done, I just want to be a faithful instrument and that means I can give the truth of God, I can speak the truth of God, I can apply the truth of God, but only He can make it live.

And so, we are, first of all, driven by a sense of privilege. And that would call us to work with a maximum effort, not offering him some weak half effort but strong all our days, battling to understand the truth, struggling to proclaim it. Taking every opportunity to preach it far and wide.

I'm always caught in that tension. People say, "You go too much, you travel too much. You're too many places. You preach too much." And there's a sense in which there needs to be a propriety about that and, you know, you're in to too many projects, you write too many things and there's too much going. But the other side of that is that the privilege is so great and the transformation of lives is the only thing that matters in the whole universe anyway, and if God has called me to be a coworker, how can I give less than everything I have to that effort?

Such a man is A.T. Robertson wrote, that a man who is a faithful man, who understands his privilege, is able to be intellectually alert and alive to all the pressing doctrinal issues of a vital Christianity in its grapple with the theological vagaries and philosophy of the time. And that just adds another dimension. We don't only have to preach the truth, we have to protect it and preserve it.

Paul knew the Scripture. He knew its interpretation. He knew its application to life. He knew the effort it took to teach and preach and pray relentlessly. He knew the enemy. He knew the enemy's systems. He knew Judaism. He knew mysticism. He knew existing philosophies. He was a man who understood the principles of ministry and understood the Word of God and how it fit with his times. And he was relentless in fulfilling the privilege of his ministry.

He came to the end of his life and he finished strong. He said, "I've finished the course, I've kept the faith. I've run the race." But he was always in awe of his privilege. "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord," he told Timothy, "even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor, He put me into service. It's a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all, and yet for this reason I found mercy in order that in me as the foremost Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life." And he was so overwhelmed by the fact that God saved him and called him into the ministry when he was such a wretched sinner that he closes that little testimony in 1 Timothy 1 by saying, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." And then he turns to Timothy and says, "Timothy, don't shirk the privilege God has given you, it's too great.

I will admit I don't want to fail you as a church. I don't want to do that. I don't want to disappoint my flock. I don't want to fail my fellow workers, those that I work with all the time, those who look to me for leadership and friendship and assistance. I don't want to shame my wife and children. I don't want to be unfaithful to any of those who are around me who have expectations for the faithfulness of my ministry. But my faithfulness and my diligence and persistence is really tied mostly to the fact that I don't want to treat lightly the marvelous grace of God who counted me worthy to be His personal coworker. And that's the highest level of accountability, to even be asked to play a part in the unfolding drama of redemption is beyond description. And therefore ministry is never drudgery, it is always honor.

So we begin with a perspective on ministry that fixes on privilege. Let's look at a second perspective. A perspective on ministry that fixes on passion. And privilege leads to passion, and the two are really inseparable. But in 2 Corinthians chapter 6 Paul says in that same first verse, "Like God we also urge you," you have God entreating back in verse 20, that's the same word, parakaleo, God beseeching, God begging, God urging, God entreating, here's the same word, "We also parakaleo, beseech, urge, exhort you not to receive the grace of God in vain for He says at the acceptable time I listened to you at the day of salvation I helped you, behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation."

Here we find there's more than just privilege in the heart of Christ's ambassador. And not just the minister, but any faithful Christian. There's more than just privilege in being a coworker with God. There is passion. There is zeal. There is persistence. And Paul says we also beg you, urge you, entreat you, beseech you, exhort you along with God. Listen, the preacher is a pleader. He is a beggar. And admittedly there is a certain monotony with the preacher. He is a drone. He keeps harping on the same stuff. He keeps pleading for the same commitment. That's his passion. God is a beggar and God's representative is a beggar too. And he's beseeching and pleading.

And what is it we plead for? "That you not receive the grace of God for nothing." Boy, that is a very important statement, I want you to understand it. God's ambassador is a pleader. He is an exhorter. This is his chief function and there is indeed a certain monotony in that. And Paul is pleading here for the Corinthians not to turn away from the grace of God which had been so faithfully preached to them. Don't make all those efforts a waste. The preacher feels this week in, week out, month in, month out, year in, year out, he pours out his heart preaching, preaching, preaching, preaching. And sometimes he looks at the lives of people and says it's all for nothing, it's all for nothing.

Exposing them to the truth so that they can understand it, the truth of salvation so that they can understand it, so they understand the urgency of it, the importance of it, and they reject and reject and reject and reject and reject and it's all for nothing. And then the believers, talking to them about the path of sanctification, preaching to them the things regarding devotion to Jesus Christ, and you watch them slip and slide and disobey and their life isn't what it ought to be. And you ask yourself if the preaching wasn't all for nothing.

And Paul was feeling that at this particular time with regard to the Corinthian church because there was so much that was wrong there. He's pleading for the Corinthians not to turn away from the grace of God which had been so faithfully proclaimed to them. The apostle had given his soul to the Corinthians. He had given them his heart. He had given them twenty months or so of his life, day in and day out, he had given the truth of the gospel, the truth of God, and he is fearful that their current attitude, their current conduct indicates that they are being lured away from that truth. They are falling into sin and a whole effort was sort of for nothing. That's tragic.

In chapter 11 of this same epistle, 2 Corinthians 11 verse 3, he says, "I'm afraid lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." My concern is that you are going to be led away from the things I taught you. And in verse 4 he even says, "If someone comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully, for I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles." What you have then here is some people coming and preaching a false Jesus, a false gospel, a false spirit. Some of them were buying into it. Some of them were being deceived, falling away from simplicity of devotion to Jesus Christ. Paul can't stand still for that. He can't just let that happen. He can't let people flop over into a false gospel. He can't let them fall into a false path of sanctification.

Sometimes people say to me, you know, "Why is it that you have to confront all these issues?" It's just part of the passion of ministry so that ministry isn't in vain. You have a generation of Christians in America to whom the grace of God has been preached clearly, explicitly, pointedly, and directly so that there is no reason why anybody wouldn't understand the truth of the gospel, and yet there is such

chaos and confusion across the board in evangelicalism in America, you wonder if half the Christians even understand what the gospel is. To confront that muddy water, to confront that lack of clarity, to exhort people to urge them not to receive the grace of God in vain is a duty. It is a responsibility before God.

And when somebody comes along and invents a new path of sanctification, a new path to holiness apart from obedience to the Spirit of God in your life and the application of Scripture, some kind of ecstatic charismatic path which is not a biblical one, some kind of mystical experiential path which is not a biblical one, some kind of psychological path which is not a biblical one...when somebody comes along with that kind of stuff, that is cause for anxiety on the part of the faithful servant of God because what it means is people are turning away from the grace of God which has been clearly proclaimed to something which is not sound doctrine, and thus the grace of God has come in vain.

You can't just stand still. You can't just throw your arms around that. When somebody comes along and says the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation needs to be accepted...when somebody comes along and says the path of sanctification is to learn how to chase demons away...or the path of sanctification is to get slain in the Spirit at least once a week...have somebody blow you over...you can't stand by and let that go because what that is doing is basically rendering the truth useless because it substitutes error and leads people down the same path the Corinthians were being led down.

What is he referring to? As I noted, he could be concerned with the salvation issue, that the grace of God expressed in the gospel of salvation has been preached to them but some of them aren't truly saved. Some of them haven't really believed. They have the knowledge about the gospel, but they do not have saving faith. I think that's true. I think that is the case and that is why in Corinth in chapter 13 verse 5 he says, "Test yourself to see if you're in the faith, examine yourselves." Because there were people in that congregation who were socially a part of it for whatever reason but who had not come to faith and all the gospel preaching and all the grace of God in salvation proclaimed to them up to now was for nothing. And along came another group of false teachers preaching another Jesus, another Spirit, another gospel and they were following that. And Paul is saying "Have I preached you the true grace of God in vain?"

It's very similar to his expression to the Galatians. In chapter 1 verse 6 he says, "I am amazed you are so quickly deserted...deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel." I came, I preached you the grace of Christ and you've deserted that for a different gospel...which is really not another gospel, it's a distortion of the true gospel. And anybody who preaches it ought to be damned, he says.

So he could be concerned as he was there in Galatians, he could be concerned about people in the church who had not yet been saved abandoning the truth of salvation by grace for the false teachers'

legalistic Judaizing cursed other gospel.

On the second hand, he could be concerned about not a salvation issue but a sanctification issue. That the grace of God which had saved them and they were redeemed was now going to be set aside for a new kind of sanctification, in this case it was the circumcision party, the Judaizing kind of element, and they were going to turn in living in the Spirit for living in the flesh by legalism. That, too, by the way occurred in the Galatian situation, that's why in chapter 3 of Galatians and verse 3 Paul says, "Are you so foolish having begun by the Spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh?" You started in the Spirit, now you're going to turn to the flesh and think you can sanctify yourself. You knew you couldn't save yourself, but you think you can sanctify yourself?

You see, the false teachers said you could save yourself. The gospel says you can't. The false teachers said you could sanctify yourself, the Bible says you can't. Sanctification is a work of God only. It's not by our legalistic external ceremonial conformity to some religious code or some set of rules that we are sanctified. It's by a deepening devotion of heart-felt obedience and adoration and praise toward the Lord Jesus Christ generated by the Holy Spirit.

Now these false teachers followed Paul all over the place trying to corrupt things. And so the Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians essentially what he said to the Galatians, "I preached to you the grace of God, the grace of Christ, some of you are turning to another gospel. I told you the path of sanctification was in the power of the Spirit, some of you are turning to another path of sanctification, legalism, mysticism, Judaism, whatever it is. You began in the Spirit, you're not about to be perfected by the flesh."

In fact, in the fifth chapter of Galatians Paul really hits it hard when he says that if you are seeking to be justified by the law, you have fallen from grace. In other words, you have fallen out of the grace realm. You have apostatized.

Some of the Corinthians were saved but hindered by legalistic teaching. Some were not saved and being led to believe a false gospel of salvation by works. In both cases the grace of God would be in vain.

And that's why, I have to tell you, there's a passion in the heart of a faithful ambassador and that passion will show up with a great animosity toward anything...anything that is unbiblical because the kingdom advances and the work of God advances with the truth. And when you're committed to that, any error becomes of major significance because it corrupts the truth.

People who are not yet saved but they've heard the gospel, and then they're deceived into a false salvation. People who are saved and maybe they're young in the faith and they don't know the proper path of sanctification and they're led into some false path of sanctification which just leads

them into fleshly exercises. In both cases what happens is this, they can never...they can never take on effectively the ministry of reconciliation. That's his point. Paul says I can't stand this, I can't stand this defection...here's the reason, look at verse 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." You know what galled the apostle Paul about this error? What galled him was it meant that people who followed a false gospel, people who followed a false path of sanctification were useless in a crisis hour for proclaiming the gospel. That's what he is saying. It is time for the ministry of reconciliation. It is time for the word of reconciliation. It is time to be an ambassador for Christ. Unsaved people confused about the gospel can't do that, unsanctified people can't do that. And this is not the time for that confusion because now it is God's time to save.

And to make the point he quotes Isaiah 49:8 and it says, "For He says...He, capital `H'...God...remember we're fellow workers with God,"..and God said in Isaiah 49:8, "At the acceptable time I listened to you and on the day of salvation I helped you." God said through the Old Testament prophet Isaiah there is a time when I will hear...not always. Genesis 6:3, "My Spirit will not always strive with man." Isaiah 55:6, "Seek the Lord while He may be...what?...found and call upon Him while He is near, He isn't always found and He isn't always near."

In Hebrews chapter 4 and chapter 3 the writer warns, "You better come now, you better respond now, you better not turn away now because this is the time." Back in Proverbs chapter 1, "Wisdom shouts in the streets, she lifts her voice, you better listen, you better turn, you better repent." This is the time. "Because there will come a time when I will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your dread comes, when your dread comes like a storm and your calamity like a whirlwind and distress and anguish come on you...verse 28...you will call on Me and I will not answer, you will diligently seek Me and you'll not find Me." Paul says Isaiah the prophet recorded for us that God said there is a time, there is a certain time, a time when He listens to sinners, a time when He helps repentant sinners. And Paul comes right back under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and says, This is that time. Now...now...he says twice, twice he says behold, that's an exclamation. There's a startled reaction. Behold, he says, now is the that acceptable time. Now is that day of salvation when God will listen to repentant sinners and when God will help. And it's not always so. It's not always so.

Some people say this is the age of grace. It is. Paul says to the Corinthians, "This is the time...this is the time." Jesus understood it, did He ever. He understood that there was a time in which salvation would be offered and there would be an end to that time. It wasn't going to happen always. There is a time in God's economy and Jesus said work while it is...what?...day, for the night comes when no man can work. It's now. This is the time.

And that's why Paul was so passionate. And, people, we have the same situation. This is the hour, this is the time. People talk about the judgment of God and I believe we're experiencing it in our nation. As you know, they talk about the imminent reality of the return of Jesus Christ. They talk

about the disaster of our world. They talk about the way things are declining so rapidly, the chaos, the destruction of all that we hold precious, the death of morality, the demise of ethics and how are we going to hold our society together? And still I say to you, this is still God's time, this is still an acceptable time, it is still the day of salvation. With all that is wrong I don't know how close we are to the end, but this is still the day of grace. The grace of God has come in the substitutionary work of Christ, as chapter 5 verse 21 says, this is the time to preach that substitutionary work. And so there needs to be a relentless urgency, a persistence, a passion about proclaiming truth as God's coworker, about leading the church to do the same, fulfilling the ministry of reconciliation. This is not a time to waste, not a time to be feeble or vacillating, not a time to be deceived by false teachers, not a time to be led astray, it is a time to be clear about the truth and faithful to its proclamation.

I can't cease to confront the waste of God's gracious gospel that has come because of false teachers who would embrace a Roman Catholic works salvation. I cannot cease to confront the reality that the Charismatic Movement has reduced the saving gospel to a non-saving sentimentalism and obliterated the doctrine of sanctification. I cannot cease to confront a supposed gospel that does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord, a gospel that promises prosperity materially, a pragmatic gospel that only fixes people psychologically. This is really heart breaking. This is grievous. And if we are to be coworkers with God, if we are to be passionate about the grace of God not being in vain, then it is time for us to get to work.

Well, Paul won't settle for anything less than the grace of God achieving its purpose. And so he pleads as God does with a crisis mentality, with a sense of urgency for the people to respond. Don't let the grace of God be in vain. The paradox of ministry, sure there's going to be difficult times, of course it's going to be trying and disappointing and heart breaking as we plead with people against the grain of trends. But we have to be faithful.

In John 9:4, "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day. Night is coming when no man can work." This is day, this is time for work. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the word from the heart of the Apostle Paul to us. We thank You for the strength of the character of this man who is not only a source of truth for us but a model of faithfulness. And we are, Lord, devoted from the heart to being as faithful as he was. Help us to understand that the ministry is honor and dishonor, but to approach it as privilege and to approach it with passion. And, Lord, now work in every heart to accomplish Your perfect purpose and bring us to a higher level of commitment for Your glory, in Christ's name. Amen.

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