

From The Pulpit Of



The Marks of a Messenger

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Series: 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

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Text

6 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. 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: 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.

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.

Introduction

Last week we saw that Christians are messengers with the most amazing message in the world – you can have a reconciled relationship with God!

A message...

...that makes more messengers.

The message is that God takes the initiative to reconcile people to himself through Christ... by not counting their trespasses, their relational offenses, against them... How? How does he do that? Instead, he counts their sins to Christ on the Cross and counts Christ’s righteousness to them by faith. It’s the most amazing message in the world, if you really think about it.

And when you’ve had your estranged relationship with God reconciled by hearing and believing that message, then he makes you a messenger, he gives you the ministry of reconciliation, entrusting to you the word of reconciliation, authorizing you as his ambassador.

Christians are messengers with the most amazing message in the world.

It’s a message for the world. We are called to share it with anyone and everyone, near and far.

But it’s also a message for the church. Why? Because even in church gatherings there may be people who are not yet reconciled to God: unconverted children, seekers,

fakers, religious folks who think God loves them because of their good deeds (which is really just veiled animosity towards God that wants to show him that we can do it on our own, thank you very much).

But also, truly born-again believers still need to hear the message again and again and again. That's why Christians come together Sunday after Sunday after Sunday to be reminded of the gospel. We can forget. We can still operate in our old flesh instead of the New Creation. We can slip into a works-based mindset that doesn't enjoy the good relationship that's been purchased for us by Christ and acts like we have to placate him. We still need to hear the message and we need to be messengers to each other.

And that's what Paul is doing here for the church in Corinth. He's sharing the message again to church people. You are loved, not because you are good, but because God is good and has atoned for your sins. And now you have a Heavenly Father who is holy and who is wholly pleased with you, on account of Christ. Repent and believe again. And help each other do this today and throughout the week. Speak the gospel to non-believers and believers alike. Isn't it beautiful to be part of a community where you will hear this message constantly and be on a mission to spread it to more and more people?

So – a message and being a messenger. Now today Paul models for us three marks of a messenger. These are three features that should characterize messengers of the gospel of reconciliation. The first is urgency (we see that from vv. 1-2). The second is suffering (we get that from the litany Paul gives in vv. 3-10). And the third is openness (which comes from vv. 11-13). Urgency, suffering, and openness. In short, what God is teaching us today from this passage of Scripture is just this: **Christian messengers aren't messing around; they really mean it.**

Let's pray... “Lord GOD... give... me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary” (Is. 50:4).

Urgency (vv. 1-2)

What is the first mark of a messenger that we see here in this section of Scripture? It's that messengers have a sense of urgency.

Paul says, “Working together with him...” Pause and take that in. It's the Greek verb – *sunergeo*, from which we get the English word *synergy*. When you're a messenger sharing the gospel with an unbeliever or a believer, you're working, but you're never doing it on your own. You are empowered by him – God. The Holy Spirit is attached to your words. Paul said a few verses above that as “ambassadors for Christ, God [is] making his appeal through us” (5:20). That's so cool. When we speak the message of the Cross, we are working, but God is also working. Our words go out with the power and authority of God himself attached to them. We are fellow laborers with God!

This heightens the confidence and seriousness with which we speak. Paul says, “Working together with him, then, we appeal to you.” Messengers aren't hem hawing – “Uh, maybe, you know, if you want, I've found this works for me, you might want to consider possibly maybe perhaps trying it?” No, we are direct, confident, unabashed. We appeal, we implore, we beseech people...

“...not to receive the grace of God in vain.” There is a way as an unbeliever to hear the offer of God’s grace and waste it, by not taking it seriously, finding excuses to evade it. There is a way as a churchgoer to go through the motions, hear the message, but not really hear it. There is a way as a believer to not fully appreciate the gospel and let it go in one ear and out the other. Paul as a messenger is trying to get people’s attention and tell them they must take this seriously. He’s not **messing around**.

In v. 2, Paul quotes from Isaiah 49:8 – “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” First, just notice how this quotation is introduced. “For he says...” Who says? “He says’... presents the quoted words as if they are falling from... [God]’s lips. This was a common means of introducing Scripture in Hellenistic synagogue sermons of the day and points to a view of God’s Word as perennially ‘in play’ and relevant.”¹ Fascinating. What Scripture says, God says.

And what he said to the Israelites in Isaiah’s day, tells something to the Corinthians in Paul’s, and speaks to us today. His words essentially mean – “I’ve come to your rescue!” And now through Paul God says, “Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” It’s go-time! The method of reconciliation with God has been fully revealed now in Jesus Christ. The offer of reconciliation is being made. It’s still available, but it won’t be forever. As one scholar comments – “Few verses in the New Testament remind us more forcibly than this that the gospel must always be proclaimed as a matter of urgency for the *accepted time* will not always be with us.”²

Have you ever missed an offer, a window of opportunity? When we bring the message, we should bring it with a sense of urgency. There is no better time than the present. There’s no better day than today. My grandma always used to say, “Don’t put off to tomorrow what you can do today.” Proverbs says, “[Y]ou do not know what a day may bring.” (Prov. 27:1). You’re not guaranteed tomorrow. Why not accept and believe today?

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of D.L. Moody, preaching here in Chicago on the night of October 8, 1871. It was the 5th of a 6-part series. The talk that night was on “What Shall I Do with Jesus?” And Moody ended by saying, “I wish you would take this text home with you and turn it over in your minds during the week, and next Sunday we will come to Calvary and the cross, and we will decide what we will do with Jesus of Nazareth.” He called that the biggest mistake of his life. That very night our city burned down in the Great Chicago Fire. He didn’t get to preach that next sermon to those people.³

Listen: there’s no day like today. I don’t want to even wait until the end of this sermon to press Christ upon you. If you are here today and you are not reconciled to God, be reconciled to God right now! Stop running from him and run to him. Acknowledge your sin and your inability to escape him forever and your inability to make it up to him for your sins and simply put your trust in Jesus as your Savior, right here and now and know that you are right with him.

I admit that it’s really hard to know how to have urgency while remaining kind and tactful and patient and respectful. It’s really hard. You don’t want to be a jerk. But it’s so easy to use niceness as a perpetual excuse for never boldly sharing. And the fire of hell is coming. So, if you’re a messenger, just say it. The older I get, the more blunt I get, the more tired of beating around the bush. Today is the day of salvation. Seize the

day. And seize every opportunity to call others to Christ. The next time you're in a conversation and there's a slight opening, just take it. Just say it, not flippantly, but urgently.

Now, I'm not saying this as someone who is perfect at it. I blew it this week. I was lazy and in a hurry and self-protective and didn't clarify the gospel when I had a chance with a worker at Costco. But guess what? The gospel! I'm not saved by my record of evangelism, but by Christ's righteousness alone permanently imputed to me! And guess what? That makes me want to keep learning from situations like that and grow in sharing it more urgently.

Suffering (vv. 3-10)

So messengers should have a sense of urgency. Next, we see that they should be marked by a life of suffering. It kind of naturally follows, right? People who just tell others what they want to hear instead of the truth, can usually get by pretty well, be popular, live a life of ease. But a true Christian messenger's life will be marked by suffering.

Paul says in v. 3 – “We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.” What does he mean by that? *We don't say hard things? We don't say anything that might offend?* No, it means that he gives no unnecessary offense, not legitimate excuse, no real reason to dismiss the message. He doesn't want his lifestyle to discredit the message, but rather to display that he **really means it**.

Look at what Paul says next – “...but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way.” And then here comes the list of all the ways that he sees his life commending himself as a legit messenger. And it's not a list of great accomplishments. It's not a brag about how many followers he has or how much money he makes or how Christianity helped him get out of debt, lose 30 pounds, and have whiter teeth. It's a litany of sufferings. That's what shows that he's **not messing around**, that he **really means it**. Does your life just blend in with middle class sensibilities? Maybe some people might know that you're spiritual or religious, but they don't get the sense that you believe they need to believe like you believe? Your life is not much different from theirs; you just go to church some Sundays. Does it cost you something to be a Christian messenger?

Heading

Look at what Paul's life was like. He mentions 28 descriptors here. They can be divided into four sections, with the first item on the list really being a summary trait that catches all of them. What's the first thing he says? Great endurance. What's that mean? You just keep going. You don't give in. You don't relent. You press on. You maintain urgency for decades, until death. You never let up. You don't endure ease. You endure hardship.

Section 1

So that's the main heading. Then there are 3 groups of 3s, making 9 adversities. All of them in the original Greek have the preposition “in” before them. The first group of 3 are general ways of talking about suffering – afflictions, hardships, calamities. The Christian life is not exempt from hard things. We aren't trying to escape suffering, but

we endure through it. This shows that our faith is real, not a flash in the pan, not a fair-weather faith that fizzles out when the going gets tough. In some ways we even go into places of hardship. Several of us got together on Friday to watch a documentary about the missionary David Livingstone's life. This first group of three would cover the malaria, the time away from home and family, the attack by a lion that he underwent in his efforts to open up Africa for the gospel.

The next group of 3 gets more specific. These are specific sufferings inflicted on Paul by other people – beatings, imprisonments, riots. If you read the book of Acts you will see that Paul got beaten several times, thrown in jail, almost trampled by mobs. He suffered persecution from people who did not like his message about sin and the human inability to save themselves. We should expect the same. In our culture right now this primarily looks like getting cancelled. I read this in one of the commentaries on this passage. It said – “A ministry of reconciliation requires that one must go to those who are unreconciled and impenitent, to claim those claimed by Satan, to march boldly into the dens of vice, ignorance, and devilry. It is dangerous work.... The demonic powers do not lie down weakly in submission when the gospel is preached. But they rise up and lash out viciously in a desperate attempt to prevent it from taking hold.”⁴

The third group of 3 are also specific, but instead of sufferings inflicted on Paul by others, these represent self-imposed hardships – labors, sleepless nights, hunger. Paul was disciplined, self-controlled. He wasn't a masochist. He wasn't an ascetic. But self-protection wasn't his highest value. He regularly inconvenienced himself for the sake of the mission. He labored, he worked hard. He had sleepless nights, staying up late when needed or rising early, tossing and turning from the stress. He skipped meals, either from fasting or from frugality due to a tight salary. How about you? Is your life pretty safe and protected, or are you giving up your rights regularly to serve others by sharing the message? Are you willing to open your house for ministry even if it messes with your kids' naps or bed times? Are you willing to get up early to have breakfast with someone you're discipling before work?

Section 2

So endurance is the key word. Then 9 hard things – 3 groups of 3 (general, specific imposed by others, and specific imposed by self). Next comes 8 commitments that bound him and kept him from cutting corners. All of them are preceded in the Greek by the little preposition “in.”

The first 4 are 1-word virtues – purity, knowledge, patience, kindness. It takes diligent effort to maintain integrity. It requires work to grow in understanding. It's hard to stick things out and not just get bored and move on. It takes proactivity to be thoughtful of others. Purity, knowledge, patience, kindness. That's not easy.

The other four are 2-word phrases – Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, God's power. Paul wasn't self-reliant, looking for short-cuts and quick results. He was dependent on the Lord, really cared for people, wasn't just saying things superficially, and he didn't try to manipulate people through his own forcefulness. This is a ministry that is held to a higher standard. He wasn't just pragmatic, but principled. A lot of ministry can smack of marketing. But Paul intensely resisted this temptation and did the hard, long work. He wasn't just seeking quick results, but was cultivating authentic virtue in deep communion with God for the eternal sake of others.

Section 3

1 overarching word (endurance), 9 adversities (3 groups of 3), 8 commitments (2 groups of 4), and now we get 3 wide-ranging circumstances that he endured. Instead of the preposition “in,” these 3 are prefaced with the preposition “through.”

“Weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left” probably refers to the Roman soldier’s sword for offense and shield for defense, in other words – attacking and being attacked. In ministry you’re going to have to be armed and armored for all kinds of situations (cf. Eph. 6:10ff). It’s a battle, not a life of leisure. But notice the adjective “righteousness” – “weapons of righteousness.” We don’t fight dirty. We don’t use the world’s way of arguing, but God’s. It’s a fight, but it’s a good fight (cf. 1Tim. 6:12; 2Tim. 4:7).

“Through honor and dishonor.” Sometimes in ministry you are received well. People respond positively and appreciate you. But you have to be prepared for people to treat you badly. It takes a thick skin. You can’t base your feelings on the prevailing winds of public opinion. You can’t get too elated by people’s compliments of you. And you can’t get too deflated by people’s criticism. You just keep going, keep being a messenger in any climate.

“Through slander and praise.” It’s basically the same thing, just with the order reversed – the negative comes first. But it’s also a little more narrowly focused on words.

The point with these three circumstances is that sometimes things will be good, but not always. Sometimes it will feel exciting and like you’re winning, but sometimes you will feel beat up and like a loser. That’s the life of a messenger. But you keep going. You don’t get overly discouraged and give up, because you really believe the message! You’re not **messing around**; you **really mean it**.

Section 4

“Great Endurance” is the 1 main heading. 9 adversities, 8 commitments, 3 circumstances, and lastly 7 ironic appearances. These last 7 are all introduced with the word “as” in the original text. We’re at the end of v. 8, in case you’re lost.

“We are treated as imposters, yet are true.” People will accuse you of being a liar, a deceiver. They will say you’re crazy, but the reality is that you are the one in touch with reality.

“[A]s unknown, and yet well known.” Being a faithful messenger will often be a lonely task. You will feel by yourself, unknown, like you don’t fit in, nobody gets you. It’s hard. But the reality is that God knows you, intimately. He knows the number of hairs on your head (Lk. 12:7). He knows your thoughts before they are words on your lips (Mt. 6:8). He knows. And knowing that, having a reconciled relationship with your Maker makes all the difference.

“[A]s dying, and behold, we live.” Our life will look like death to many people. And in a sense, it is. It’s a series of giving things up, submitting to helplessness, laying ourselves down on the altar. However, “[w]hoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it” (Lk. 17:33). The Christian’s life in this world may look unappealing, but the reality is that we have eternal life.

“[A]s punished, and yet not killed.” To many, Paul’s life of suffering looked like he was being punished by God. *God must be unhappy with him; his life is so hard.* We

can easily fall into this prosperity gospel trap that sees physical blessings as signs of God's favor and hardships as signs of his disfavor. But that's not how it goes. Paul's not being condemned to death, but disciplined as a son whom God loves (cf. Heb. 12).

"[A]s sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." Someone might look in at a Christian's life and think it looks so sad. There are a lot of tears. There are a lot of groans. We are constantly dealing with a lot of heavy things because we take these things like sin, death, heaven, hell seriously. And yet, look a little deeper and you'll see that we have an indestructible joy, despite all the suffering. There's something intensely satisfying that we've found that keeps us going at this hard task – the pleasure of knowing Christ and making him known makes all the pain worth it. In the midst of many sorrows, a Christian is always rejoicing in the Lord.

"[A]s poor, yet making many rich." The Christian life is rarely a wealthy life by worldly measurements. We usually drive used cars. We aren't chasing fortune. We give away a significant part of what we get. We look poor, but the reality is that we have an infinite treasure that we can draw from for ourselves and give away freely that allows us to make many rich, spiritually rich.

And then lastly – "as having nothing, yet possessing everything." Our life in this world doesn't look impressive to the world. The Christian's life seems empty to non-Christians, like you've given up so much. But in truth, the world's way of living is empty and Christians have everything! 7 ironic appearances. In many ways the Christian's life looks pathetic, but we have something greater that sustains us and makes us take on suffering, not try to run away from it.

On December 4, 1857, David Livingstone got to address students at Cambridge University about "leaving the benefits of England behind" in order to get the gospel to Africa. He said this:

For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa.... Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. *I never made a sacrifice.*⁵

"A year before he died [in Africa] in 1873, he wrote in his journal on his 59th birthday, 'My birthday! My Jesus, my King, my Life, my All. I again dedicate my whole self to Thee.'"⁶ Sounds a lot like Paul, doesn't it? And it should sound like all of us.

Does it? If you're a Christian, do you take risks, embrace hardships, not seek an easy life? Is your life marked by suffering? Take some time to take stock of your life and see if you can make a similar list to Paul's here. What have you experienced as a

result of following Jesus? A life of self-consciously chosen suffering for the sake of Christ shows that **Christian messengers aren't messing around; they really mean it.**

Openness

Urgency – We *appeal*. NOW is the favorable time. TODAY is the day of salvation.

Suffering – A list of 28 descriptors Paul gives to commend himself. They're not grand accomplishments. They are, by and large, trials and tribulations that Paul could have avoided if he didn't really believe the message and wasn't seeking to be a messenger. But he did believe it. He was willing to endure great distress for it.

The third mark of a messenger that we get in today's passage is **Openness**. A messenger must be urgent, must suffer, and must be open. Look at vv. 11-13.

Paul says, "We have spoken freely to you." He's not holding back, but being completely honest and open.

He says, "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians." Two other times in his letters we see Paul addressing his audience by name like this. Galatians 3:1 – "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" Philippians 4:15 – "And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only." Paul, it seems, employs this form of speech when he's feeling emotional. Paul is not a dispassionate messenger.

He adds, "[O]ur heart is wide open." Paul is not private, professional, superficial. He's vulnerable, transparent. His life, and more than that, his heart, his affections are an open book to others. This is the heart of a messenger who cares deeply about those he's trying to share the message with.

The Corinthians, however, were being a bit guarded. Verse 12 – "You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections." It's an interesting description. They were emotionally stunted. How about you? Are you in tune with your interior self? And do you express it to others? Or do you come off as cold and distant to people? A messenger should be urgent but also compassionate. Have you ever had someone say something to you that was true, but it felt mechanical? We shouldn't share the message like that. We should be willing to open ourselves up personally to those we're sharing with.

Listen to what Paul said to the Thessalonians. He said – "[W]e were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1Thess. 2:7-8). That's the mark of an authentic messenger. You may feel unknown at times, but it shouldn't be because you're not sharing yourself.

You know what happens when you open up your heart to other people, right? There's the risk that it will not be requited. It's a risk we must take. But we hope for a reciprocal response. Paul says, "In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also." In other words, Paul is like a spiritual parent to the Corinthians. He's pouring himself out to them, but they are being immature at the moment and not acting in kind. But a messenger keeps pursuing and doesn't close himself off in response.

It reminds me of the C.S. Lewis quote where he says:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.⁷

Conclusion

These are some of the marks of a messenger: urgency, suffering, openness. When present, they show that **Christian messengers aren't messing around; they really mean it.** I remember many years ago there was a guy who got saved and baptized and joined our church from a place that was very far from God. He invited a co-worker to come to church and he warned him by saying, “Now these people really believe this stuff!” I hope, I think that's still the case.

But we're not perfect messengers. We're not pointing people to ourselves. Really our message is that Jesus is someone you must take seriously.

He was the perfect balance of tenderness and earnestness in his earthly ministry, urgently (cf. Lk. 13:22-30; Jn. 12:35-36) calling people to come to him (e.g., Mt. 11:28, Jn. 7:37), saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1:14-15).

He was the perfect embodiment of a life of suffering. “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds 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” (Is. 53:3-6).

And he was not restrained in his affections or closed off from people. To his disciples he said, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you (Jn. 15:15). He prayed to the Father about us – “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” He's opened up his heart wide to you. In return, widen your hearts also to him.

The Lord's Table

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20).

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, September 27, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 317.

² R.V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974 [1958]), 92.

³ https://www.moodypublishers.com/moody-resource/file_cache/MARKETING/415576F8E38607DDE06340641AAC2A9B.PDF?

⁴ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC (Brentwood: B&H, 1999), 307.

⁵ *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds. (William Carey Library, 1981), 259.

⁶ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/i-never-made-a-sacrifice>

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Diego: Harvest, 1960), 121.