



SECOND CORINTHIANS The STRENGTH of WEAKNESS

Devotional Meditations on 2 Corinthians by Sam Storms

2 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS

Receiving the Grace of God in Vain (2 Cor. 6:1-2)

I struggle to think of a more glowing endorsement than that which Paul gave the church in Thessalonica. He applauds them for the fact that when the gospel was preached they “received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6). Again, “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13). Needless to say, no one would ever suggest that the Thessalonians had received the grace of God “in vain”!

Sadly, the same can't be said of everyone. Consider Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians:

“Working together with him, then, *we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain*. For he says, ‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

What does Paul mean by “the grace of God”? And what does it mean to “receive” it “in vain”?

The first question is the easier of the two. It may be that “the grace of God” is simply Paul's shorthand way of referring to the gospel and its benefits. In light of the immediately preceding context, he may have specifically in mind the new attitude of 5:16, the new creation of 5:17, the reconciliation of 5:18-19, the righteousness of God of 5:21, etc. All of this is wrapped up in the word “salvation” in 2 Corinthians 6:2. Murray Harris is correct in pointing out that “within the wider context of the letter, ‘the grace of God’ will also refer to the present opportunity that the Corinthians have to become fully reconciled to Paul” (458).

The second question, obviously, is more difficult to answer. Some believe he is urging them not to forfeit the grace of salvation which they had earlier received. In other words, it is an exhortation to persevere and to avoid apostasy.

Others suggest that the exhortation in vv. 1-2 is not directed to those Corinthians who are already born-again, but to those in Corinth who had repeatedly heard the gospel but had made no decision. Paul was not so naïve to think that everyone in the *professing* church was necessarily truly converted. Therefore, his command not to receive the grace of God in vain is equivalent to an exhortation to all men not to reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. But is “to receive in vain” really the same as to utterly “reject”? I don't think so, as I'll point out below.

God's grace may be received in vain when it is received superficially or externally, as in the parable of the soils (Luke 8:4-15; Matt. 13:18-23). There the seed (gospel) falls upon rocky ground or among thorns, to be snatched away or choked by the temptations of this world. This view is similar to the previous one,

insofar as the people in view are unbelievers. The difference is that, according to this interpretation, people don't explicitly reject the gospel but "receive" and "believe" it, but only in a superficial way. Their so-called "faith" is spurious and therefore temporary.

Perhaps receiving the grace of God in vain pertains not so much to salvation per se, or its forfeiture, but to the loss of potential blessings related to spiritual growth, knowledge, and joy that they would suffer by rejecting Paul as their apostle. In other words, the people are truly saved. They have genuinely received the gospel and believed it, but they have failed to progress in their Christian growth and stand in danger of losing those spiritual blessings and rewards they otherwise might have obtained. Philip Hughes embraces a similar view and suggests that

"for them to receive the grace of God in vain meant that their practice did not measure up to their profession as Christians, that their lives were so inconsistent as to constitute a denial of the logical implications of the gospel, namely, and in particular, that Christ died for them so that they might no longer live to themselves but to His glory" (218-19).

In other words, the passionate conviction which accompanied their salvation had not as yet performed its transforming work in their lives. It is to that progressive transformation of their daily experience that Paul is urging and exhorting them.

Judith Gundry-Volf suggests that to receive the grace of God in vain may be referring largely, if not exclusively, to their opposition to the apostle himself. The context surrounding this statement is Paul's description of his ministry on their behalf and his attempt to restore good relations with the Corinthians (5:13-14; 5:18-6:1; see especially his impassioned appeal in 6:11-13). In Paul's opinion, to reject *him* is to reject the divine grace of which he is a minister. Gundry-Volf then argues that Paul's appeal is simply "*for the sake of argument only*" (280). I.e., he does *not* believe they *will* reject or deny him, but if they were to do so it would be tantamount to receiving the grace of God, which was his message to them, in vain.

I think the key to this difficult text is found in the word translated "vain" (Gk., *kenos*; cf. its use in Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 3:5). It typically means either "empty" or without content or, as here, "vain" or ***without purpose or result***. Harris argues that "to receive God's grace 'in vain' (*eis kenon*) is not to 'reject' it . . . or even to 'neglect' it . . . but to receive it without profit, without the intended effect being achieved. The grace is accepted, but it never attains its goal; it comes to nothing" (458-59). If so, "Paul is exhorting his Corinthian converts not to fail to profit from the proffered divine grace, or, expressed positively, to give God's grace an effective welcome, to capitalize on opportunities for spiritual growth" (Harris, 459).

But how might they let God's grace come to no end?

Consider Paul's exhortation to the Colossians that they conduct themselves wisely "toward outsiders, making the best use of the time" (Col. 4:5) or "making the most of the opportunity". Similarly, if the Corinthians "squandered God-given opportunities for bringing spiritual benefit to themselves and to unbelievers . . . , and if they failed to exercise the ministry of reconciliation (5:18) and to fulfill their role as Christ's ambassadors (5:19); more specifically, if they accommodated the false apostles (11:13-15), or embraced a 'different gospel' (11:4), or failed to repudiate paganism (6:14-18) and personal sin (7:1; 12:20-21), or spurned Paul's overtures of reconciliation (6:13; 7:2)" (Harris, 459), they would be guilty of having received the grace of God "in vain."

If this view is correct, and I'm inclined to think it is, Paul's appeal is to Christians that they avail themselves of God's gracious enabling so that the purpose or aim of their salvation might be attained. The "grace of God" is designed to equip believers to proclaim Christ and not themselves (4:5) and to live for

Christ and not themselves (cf. 5:15). I also agree with Harris that “if God’s grace flows continuously, a single failure to benefit from it would not stem the flow. What would be compromised, however, would be the receipt of commendatory recompense at Christ’s tribunal (5:10)” (459).

To receive the grace of God in vain, therefore, is not to reject it altogether and live as an unbeliever, nor is it to receive the grace of God and subsequently forfeit or lose its saving power. Rather, Paul is talking about the urgency and importance of the Corinthians responding to God’s grace in humble obedience and seizing every opportunity to “please” the Lord (2 Cor. 5:9) in how they live, speak, act, and perhaps especially in how they respond to his efforts to rebuild and restore a relationship that had been undermined by suspicion, false reports, and the sinister efforts of the false teachers in their city.

God’s grace comes to us not simply once in the gospel but as a constant and never-ceasing flow of merciful enablement and sanctifying power. Like the Corinthians, we must be diligent to avail ourselves of it at all times, taking advantage of every occasion to do “good” (rather than “evil”) so that it might attain to the goal for which God has bestowed it and so that we might receive “what is due” for what we, by means of that very grace, have “done in the body” (see 2 Cor. 5:10).

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: The Most Eloquent Advertisement for the Gospel (2 Cor. 6:3)

Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa, the ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, recently made news by announcing his intention to investigate several prominent Christian ministries to determine whether or not they have exploited their tax-exempt status as churches to provide themselves with opulent and lavish lifestyles. Those who’ve been asked by the Senator to submit financial records include Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, Eddie Long, and Paula White.

Without intending to pass premature judgment on these individuals, Senator Grassley’s action is indicative of a belief that exists among most people, both Christian and non-Christian, that the *conduct* of a “minister” ought to be consistent with the *content* of his/her “message”. Grassley evidently shares the opinion of many who believe that the church and its ministry are discredited by the disreputable behavior of those who are its leaders and members. Conversely, the message can be enhanced and adorned by the godliness, humility, and self-sacrifice of those who proclaim the gospel of Christ crucified.

Whether or not these six are living in a way that undermines the message or in some way brings reproach on the name of Christ is for each person to decide. But the fact remains that how we as Christians conduct ourselves in the sight of others has massive repercussions on their assessment of the gospel we preach.

No one knew this better than the apostle Paul. In fact, most of 2 Corinthians is concerned with his conduct as a gospel minister and whether or not it condemns or commends him as a genuine apostle of Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 is perhaps the most explicit example of this in the entire book. We will spend several meditations unpacking its rich and instructive content. Here is what Paul said:

“We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful,

yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:3-10).

My concern in this meditation is solely with v. 3, where Paul writes, “We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.”

Although the ESV translates the verb simply as “we put”, the present tense of the Greek should probably be rendered something along the lines of “*we are trying to put* no obstacle in anyone’s way” with the emphasis on Paul’s customary and repeated *modus operandi*. This is the consistent and committed posture of his labors as an apostle. There simply are no circumstances under which Paul would act any other way. There is *never, ever* an excuse for speaking or “ministering” in such a fashion that “fault” may be found with the good news of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Paul's preeminent concern is with the “ministry” God has entrusted to him, not his own reputation or position or influence. The only self-commendation he cares for is as a “servant/minister” of God. He is more than willing to be slandered and ridiculed, beaten and imprisoned, just so long as the glorious good news of Christ crucified suffers no reproach.

The word translated to find “fault” (ESV) or be “discredited” (NASB) is a verb related to the noun *momus*, a name given to the Greek god of ridicule or mockery. Paul wants nothing in his life to be used by others as an excuse for laughing at the truth. If offense is to be taken at the gospel, let it be because of the *content* of what he proclaims and not any misconduct in his own life.

The “obstacle” or cause for offense is any questionable action or self-serving speech that would prompt people to doubt Paul’s integrity or sincerity and thereby bring the gospel he proclaimed into disrepute or cause it to be ridiculed or censured. In the immediate context, in relation to the Corinthians, Paul might have in mind anything on his part that would hinder their acceptance of him or their fellowship with one another or their commitment to proclaim and advance the message of the gospel.

Of course, there is no guarantee that in conducting himself properly and in purity that Paul (or we) will avoid the condemnation of others. “He is thinking of *unnecessary* offense and *unjustified* censure” (Harris, 469; emphasis mine). The notion that eternal life is available only by faith in a crucified and risen messiah is inherently foolish “to those who are perishing” (1 Cor. 1:18). The Jews in Paul’s day found it to be a “stumbling block” (1 Cor. 1:23a) and the Gentiles mocked it as “folly” (1 Cor. 1:23b). But where Paul was able to avoid putting an obstacle in anyone’s path, “he professed to be scrupulously careful” (Harris, 469).

To illustrate Paul’s point, consider this hypothetical conversation between a Christian (“Steve”) and his unbelieving co-worker (“Mike”).

Steve: “Mike, did you have an opportunity to read that book I gave you about Christianity?”

Mike: “Yes, and I have to be honest in saying that I was offended by much of what it said. I don’t particularly like being told I’m morally depraved and a sinner! That’s not the sort of language that ‘wins friends and influences people’! It’s a ‘PC world’, Steve, and people don’t want to hear it.”

Steve: “You’re right. They don’t. But what they want isn’t of paramount importance. What they *need* is the truth, even if it hurts or causes offense. By the way, what was your impression of what the author said about Jesus Christ?”

Mike: “Honestly, I found it a bit ridiculous. That there is only one God who became a human being named Jesus is one thing. But to tell me that he lived a perfect life, died on a cross where he suffered for the sins of people like me, and then came back to life again; well, I felt like I was back in my college course on Greek mythology! Worst of all, though, is the argument that I need to ‘repent’ of my sins and put my faith in this Jesus as my only hope for reconciliation with God. How absurd! How arrogant of you people!”

Steve: “I understand your reaction, Mike. Really, I do. But I want you to know that I’m praying for you, asking that the Spirit of God will give you eyes to see the beauty in what you now find ugly as well as a new spiritual taste for what you now find bitter. But let me ask you one more thing. Have I behaved in an offensive way? Do you see in me any hypocrisy or insincerity or do my words or actions come across as incompatible with what you know about Christianity? If so, I need to change.”

Mike: “No, my beef isn’t with you. Your life is remarkably consistent with your message. I wish I could say that of everyone I’ve known who called themselves Christians. But I can’t.”

Steve: “I appreciate that, Mike. But you should know that if there’s anything ‘good’ in me it’s all because of the grace of God.”

Mike: “See, that’s just what I mean. I compliment you and you’re so darn humble! That’s a rare thing these days. In fact, if there’s anything that makes me want to read the book again and at least think about the claims of Christ, it’s the way you’re so unashamed about your faith and your love for God. You seem so content and I’ve never heard you make a sexual comment about the girls in the office. Yeah, maybe I’ll read it again and we can get together and talk about it.”

Although not apostles, you and I are “servants of God” and have a “ministry” no less so than Paul. What “obstacles” do we put in the way of others seeing the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ? Do they find “fault” with your life? Or are they, like Mike, curious about why you turn from immorality and delight in marital fidelity? Are they intrigued by your passion for the beauty of God and your disdain for the tawdry and unseemly trivialities of this world?

When they speak of you behind your back, do they marvel at your contentment or mock you for joining others in fudging on your time sheet? Is it obvious, in the way you talk and work and live, that your happiness is rooted in a transcendent power that cannot be explained in mere earthly terms? To live in such a way that God looks good is costly. Treasuring him above all may not comport well with the ambitious and materialistic ethos of our day. But it pays a rich and eternal reward.

Let us never forget that the gospel itself is more than sufficient to offend self-centered and arrogant sinners. May it never be that we aggravate this effect with our boorish and self-aggrandizing behavior. “It is always true,” writes Murray Harris, “that *the life of the Christian is the most eloquent advertisement for the gospel*” (469).

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: When People See You, Does God look Good? (2 Cor. 6:4)

In case you skipped it, let me repeat the question in the title: “When People see *You*, does *God* look Good?” Not many of us phrase it in precisely that way or even think in those terms. It’s far more natural for us to ask, “When people see me, do *I* look good?” Do I impress them with my charisma? Are they

captivated by my wit? Are they attracted by how I dress? Did they take note of my intelligence? Do they still think of me an hour or two later?

We are obsessed with what others think of us. We are elated when they find in us something to praise and are crushed when they are offended. That is why we are so given to self-commendation, self-promotion, and self-improvement. So often our very identity and thus our value hang suspended on the opinion of those who “see” us.

But wait a minute. If this sort of concern for self is so sinful, why did Paul “commend” himself to the Corinthians here in 2 Corinthians 6:4a? And doesn’t this conflict with his earlier denunciation of self-commendation in 3:1? It would appear from these two texts that there are at least two sorts of self-commendation, one good (6:4a) and the other bad (3:1).

Let’s take a closer look at this passage (6:4a), for Paul does not “commend” himself and leave it at that, as if his efforts were devoted to securing a positive response from the Corinthian church. It is as “servants of God”, or more accurately, “**ministers**” of God, that he and his co-workers labor to elicit their approval. And the criteria to which he appeals as grounds for their acceptance are not very appealing: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, hunger, slander, sorrow, etc. Not the sort of things one would typically include on a resume!

Evidently Paul believed that commending oneself as a *minister of God* was not only permissible, but mandatory, even godly. How so? What does it mean to draw attention to oneself *as a minister of God* and how does it avoid the sinful self-serving that Paul and other biblical writers so consistently condemn?

I want to suggest that commending oneself as a minister of God consists of living and acting and speaking in such a way that others think not of you but of him. They don’t so much look *to you as through you*, and in the light of your life see him. Again, to use the words of the title above, it means conducting yourself in such a manner that when others see you, God looks good! Let me explain this by asking a series of pointed (and painful) questions.

When you pray, do people comment on your eloquence or God’s excellency?

When you intercede in a corporate gathering, are those present impressed with your godliness or God’s goodness?

On those occasions when your life is subject to public scrutiny, do people think of the heights of your abundance or the depths of your need? Are they inclined to think about your devotion, and how fortunate God is to have you as his “minister”, or are they awakened to your utter dependency and God’s endless supply?

When people see how I spend money, do they conclude that **God** is a priceless treasure, exceedingly valuable above all worldly goods?

When people observe my relationship with others, are they alerted to the power of Christ’s forgiveness of me that alone accounts for my forgiveness of them?

When we open our mouths and speak of others in public (or private), are they made to think of Jesus in whose mouth no “deceit” was found (1 Peter 2:22), the one who, when reviled, “did not revile in return” (1 Peter 2:23)?

When we respond to injustice or mistreatment, are our words and ways the sort that lead them to glorify the God-man who “did not threaten” those who abused him “but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23)?

When I am seen interacting with people of another race, do observers instinctively fix their thoughts on God’s love for all without regard to color of skin or ethnic heritage?

If I am complimented for some accomplishment, does the way I receive it drive onlookers to give thanks to the Lord?

Do I preach the Word in such a way that eyes are riveted on me or turned upward to behold the beauty of Christ?

Is my use of leisure time or devotion to a hobby or how I speak of my wife the sort that persuades others that my heart is content with what God is for me in Christ?

Does my reaction to bad news produce in you doubt or fear, or does it inspire confidence to trust in God’s providence?

When I feel disappointment or experience a shattered dream, is your trust in his promises diminished or enhanced?

Does my reaction to suffering inspire your comfort in him?

To use Paul’s word, when I “minister” among you, are you captivated by my credentials or energized to find satisfaction in God’s merciful sufficiency?

Paul couldn’t have cared less about his own reputation, unless by seeing him they savored God. If his weakness magnified God’s power, then by all means, watch. So long as his life was a window through which others might behold the goodness and grace of Christ, he was more than happy to commend himself to their scrutiny.

“Don’t look *at* or *to* me,” said Paul, “but *through* me, as a minister of God, to the fountain of all goodness and grace.”

So again, when others see you, does *God* look good?

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: Examples of Endurance in Waco, Texas (2 Cor. 6:4)

This past weekend (January 18-20, 2008) Ann and I had the privilege of attending the World Mandate conference in Waco, Texas, sponsored by Antioch Community Church and Antioch Ministries International. This was our second time to make the trip south for what has proven on both occasions to be a marvelously instructive and encouraging experience.

World Mandate has one preeminent goal, regardless of the year or the speakers or the date when it is held. That goal is to awaken our hearts to the plight of a lost and dying world and to energize and equip both young and old to take the gospel of Christ’s love to the nations of the earth.

Both years we attended we had the incredible privilege of hearing the testimonies of men and women who have happily turned their back on the comforts of western society for the indescribable privilege (yes, *privilege*) of joyfully suffering for Christ's sake (yes, *joyfully*) so that his name and glory may be spread globally to those who have never heard the good news.

Ann and I have come away each time stunned by the courage and commitment of these people, inspired by their example, but most of all encouraged by their endurance. Endurance is an interesting word, both in English and in Greek. We often think of the marathon runner as displaying remarkable endurance by being able to run, without pause, for more than 26 miles. The word connotes the idea of a refusal to quit, a commitment to persevere in spite of the worst imaginable pain and the most oppressive of circumstances.

The Greek term translated "endurance" (*hupomone*) means much the same. It most often refers to the ability to stand up under pressure and to endure affliction without resorting to complaint or bitterness or a self-serving victim mentality.

Here in 2 Corinthians 6:4 it stands as something of a general heading or topic statement for what follows in the rest of the paragraph (vv. 4b-10). It is designed to indicate how the apostle Paul faithfully embraced the many expressions of adversity that he lists. In other words, how did Paul face up to "afflictions, hardships, and calamities" (v. 4b), or to "beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger" (v. 5)? He did it "by [or with] great endurance" (v. 4a).

I regret having to say this, but when I encounter trials of this sort (and I have yet to encounter them in the way that Paul did on a regular basis), it isn't with "great endurance" that I respond but with "great griping" or "much mumbling" or "constant complaining" or some such sinful attitude.

I didn't hear much, if any, of that at World Mandate. That isn't to say these folk are immune to the temptation to grow weak and weary. They struggle to persevere, and often want to quit. But most of them don't. Something invisible sustains them. Their hearts are buoyed by an unseen power.

I think particularly of one friend that I met three years ago in Waco whose endurance in the face of adversity and repeated life-threatening incidents is such an encouragement to me and a reflection of what the apostle Paul himself describes here in 2 Corinthians 6:4-10. For his own protection (and that of his family), I'm not at liberty to mention his name or where he is planting a church, but it would be difficult to think of a more perilous place on earth. So how is he so determined, so relentless, so willing to put at risk his own welfare for the sake of lost souls? What accounts for this "great" and other-worldly "endurance"?

There are several ways to answer that question, but since it is Paul who makes the point in 2 Corinthians 6:4-10, I'll let his own words supply the reply. He writes:

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that ***through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*** May ***the God of endurance*** and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus" (Rom. 15:4-5).

Observe how God is described. He is "the God of endurance" (v. 5). That is to say, endurance finds its source in him. If we endure in a good and godly way, we must attribute it to him. It flows from his heart to ours.

All well and good, one might say. But *how* does he do it? Through what means or mechanism does God sustain weary souls and broken bodies and hearts threatened with disillusionment? Does endurance gently fall to earth like the manna of old, descending like dew for us to gather up and ingest? No, not exactly.

Paul couldn't have been clearer about how God imparts endurance and encouragement to the human heart: it is ***through the Scriptures!*** The "Scriptures" Paul has in view is, of course, the Old Testament (for us today, it is the entire canon of inspired writ). This is God's ordained instrument for supplying us with the wherewithal to persevere, the ultimate purpose of which, he notes, is so that "we might have hope" (v. 4b).

When the Word of God is read and heard and understood and believed, the Spirit uses it to produce steadfastness and strength to hold on in the face of what appears to be insurmountable opposition. Paul is not talking about gritting our teeth against all odds. He has in mind hearts driven and sustained and upheld by "hope" that is itself the fruit of "endurance" that comes to us from the Scriptures.

So, how do the Scriptures impart "endurance"? How does God's Word "encourage" us and build and buoy hope in the hurting heart? Here's how.

When we meditate on the Scriptures we see inspired portrayals of God's indescribable goodness that infinitely transcends anything the physical perks of western society can supply.

When we study and muse on the Scriptures we hear infallible promises of God's abiding presence no matter how lonely we may feel or how often others abandon us in time of need.

When we focus on the Scriptures we are reminded of stories of God's faithfulness to others who have faced far worse than we have.

When we memorize the Scriptures we are later reminded of his inviolable purpose to bring us into glory through Jesus Christ no matter how resistant people may be or how determined they are to undermine our faith.

When we open our souls to the Scriptures we are alerted to stirring accounts of God's power to defeat the most vile and vicious of enemies.

When we pray through the Scriptures we are nourished by poetic descriptions of his majesty and grandeur and love and kindness and splendor and glory.

And when we labor to understand the Scriptures we learn of simple and oft-repeated truths about his compassion for his children and his forgiving of their sins and his covenant faithfulness and his singing over them in passionate, heartfelt affection.

My friend in Waco isn't an extraordinarily strong man. He's not wealthy. He's smart, but not a genius. So why is he able to accomplish what others only dream of? Simply put, he exudes *great endurance!* He is upheld by persistent faith! His commitment is undying and unflagging! And all this from the God of endurance, imparted to him (and to us) through the Scriptures.

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: Feasting on the Promise of a Future with Christ (2 Cor. 6:4-5)

There is hardly a time when I'm more keenly aware of my sinful and selfish orientation than when my personal comfort and convenience are threatened or interrupted. When I miss a meal, I'm grumpy. When the air conditioner breaks, I'm irritable. When I'm in pain, I complain. It grieves me to see how often I act as if I deserved physical security and emotional peace and a full stomach. I'm stunned by how much time, energy, and money I devote to avoid what makes for turmoil and discomfort.

Now, I'm not at all suggesting that a person should actively seek those things that breed distress or anguish or deprivation. People who do are either masochistic or suffer from a perverted martyr complex. There's nothing inherently good in pain. In fact, it is part of our calling as Christians to help alleviate the suffering and hardship of others. But in doing so, it may well require that we ourselves willingly embrace danger, the loss of freedom and property, as well as the disruption of our cherished routines and schedules.

No one knew this better than Paul, a man who personally suffered almost indescribable agony for the sake of Christ and the welfare of his people. It's hard for me to read Paul's description of his life and not see in it a standing rebuke and counter-argument to the health and wealth "gospel" of the 21st century. Today, sadly, we are often told that if you are among God's "anointed" and "gifted" and "favored" servants you can expect (even claim) exemption from suffering, loss, and deprivation. You're a "child of the King" and thus deserve "first class" treatment! This was similar to the argument of Paul's opponents in Corinth, who insisted that a true "apostle" of Christ would never endure the things he did. It was precisely this alleged lack of so-called *apostolic credentials* that was used to undermine his authority and authenticity in that church.

Paul was evidently asked on numerous occasions to substantiate his claim to apostolic authority. Although he detested speaking of himself, the situation at Corinth required that he identify his qualifications. He does so on several occasions (see especially 11:16-33), one of the more explicit being here in 6:4-10. "Do you want me to commend myself for your approval," he asked? "So be it. I'm happy to present myself to you as a minister of God, and on the following grounds":

"by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:4-10).

Our focus in this meditation is on vv. 4-5 in which we find three sets of three words that describe Paul's outward circumstances, all of which, it should be noted, are in the plural, indicating multiple instances or occasions on which he suffered.

In the first set of three he mentions "afflictions, hardships, calamities". "Afflictions" is a general and all-encompassing term appearing numerous times in 2 Corinthians, the most severe of which was the life-threatening experience described in 1:8-9. "Hardships" carries the thought of being under pressure, perhaps an allusion to the constant stress to which he was subjected. The word translated "calamities" literally means "in constraints" or in a confined and narrow place from which there can be no escape. It points to Paul's feeling of being trapped by circumstances seemingly beyond his control.

The second set of three points more to the direct and extremely physical persecution to which he was subjected. He often endured “beatings” (cf. 11:23-25), whether by rods, lashes, or fists. We know specifically of only one “imprisonment” (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23) before 2 Corinthians was written, which occurred in Philippi (Acts 16). This indicates that Luke’s history in Acts is obviously selective and does not purport to give us an exhaustive record of Paul’s missionary experiences.

The “riots” or uprisings against Paul in the cities where he preached are numerous: at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:50), Iconium (Acts 14:5), Lystra (Acts 14:19), Philippi (Acts 16:22), Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-7), Berea (Acts 17:13), Corinth (Acts 18:12-17), and Ephesus (Acts 19:23-20:1).

Finally, he endured “labors, sleepless nights, [and] hunger.” Unlike the first six words that describe what was done to him by others, these all refer to *self-imposed* hardships Paul embraced in the fulfillment of his ministry.

The word “labors” is either a reference to his work as a tent-maker (Acts 18:3), or could also refer to his extended and demanding seasons of work as a missionary, pastor and evangelist.

By “sleeplessness” he doesn’t mean that he suffered from insomnia, but that he voluntarily went without sleep to serve and minister to others (Paul often refers to working “night and day”; see 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8). Whether he lost sleep from working late hours to support himself, or because he was engaged in ministry late into the night, it was a choice he joyfully embraced.

Finally, he often suffered from “hunger”. There’s little agreement on any single cause for this. It certainly could be a reference to his frequent fasting. Others see a self-imposed asceticism designed to alleviate any burden from those to whom he ministered. Or it could simply be a reference to his lack of food due to the hardships of travel or even the lack of money.

As you know, I travel extensively throughout the U.S. and occasionally overseas, speaking at churches and conferences. Typically, either at some point while I’m away or immediately upon my return, my wife lovingly asks such questions as: “Did the ministry go well? Did they respond positively to what you had to say? Did you sleep well in the hotel? At what restaurants did you eat? Are you feeling o.k.?”

She’s never yet heard me say in reply: “They threw stones at me during my first sermon. One caught me square in the forehead. I felt my life was in jeopardy on a few occasions and I honestly didn’t know if I’d escape. Two leaders in the church beat me with rods and the local sheriff threw me in jail on the second night. I didn’t sleep a wink in that stinking cell and the food was so repulsive I couldn’t eat a thing. Other than that, the ministry was great!”

No one in the Christian west anticipates such treatment. If we ever encountered anything remotely similar to what Paul faced, we’d wipe the dust from our shoes and never return. Surely “ministers of God” (v. 4a) who are dedicated to the gospel ought to expect the best of everything. How dare anyone deprive us of our comforts!

So what would motivate a man to willingly pursue a life characterized by the sort of hardships Paul endured? What could possibly sustain a man through such sufferings?

One answer is found in Hebrews 10:32-34. There we read of Christians who “endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated” (vv. 32-33). Beyond this, they “**joyfully accepted the plundering of their property**” (v. 34)! Here’s why. Here’s how. **They “knew” they “had a better possession and an abiding one”** (v. 34).

The degree to which we find suffering intolerable is the degree to which we lack confidence in the glory of our inheritance in Christ. To the extent that we are embittered by oppression and persecution, we reveal our lack of satisfaction in him.

Paul was in the grip of the glory to come (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18), and found strength to endure. Like those believers in Hebrews 10, he feasted on the promise of a future with Christ and held fast.

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: What's a Christian to do? (2 Cor. 6:6-7)

What's a Christian to do? In a world of increasing contempt for the gospel and, more often than not, overt and unapologetic opposition, how is a follower of Jesus to respond? In the face of legislation that undermines our moral convictions, a secular atheism that marginalizes our presence, and a radical Islamic fundamentalism that seeks our utter eradication, is the Christian a helpless pawn in the chess game of global maneuvering? Do we fight back, and if so, how? With what weapons? With what expectations?

It would be easy for the Church to feel overwhelmed and undermanned. Abortion is law. Disdain for our cherished beliefs is commonplace. Moral decay is embraced as progress.

Just today I read of a para-church ministry that was banned from a university campus for its opposition to homosexuality, a professor who was denied tenure because of his research on Intelligent Design, and a group of Christians who were denied a zoning permit to plant a church in a residential neighborhood. And all the while Satan seems to be gaining ground. So, *what's a Christian to do?*

The opposition may have assumed a different form in the first century, when Paul was asking the same question, but the response of the Christian is the same in any and every age. When assaulted, afflicted, beaten or imprisoned, when pressured, persecuted, weakened or weary, here's how we fight:

“by purity, [by] knowledge, [by] patience, [by] kindness, [by] the Holy Spirit, [by] genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left” (2 Cor. 6:6-7).

“Oh, come on Sam. Get real. We're talking about a battle of monumental proportions. Our enemies are clever and well-equipped. They will stop at nothing to destroy the body of Christ. They are relentless and ruthless. They will use any tactic, legal or not, to win. They have unlimited financial resources, unchecked political power, and numbers that dwarf us. And here you are recommending that we fight back with pious, pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by spiritual platitudes! Give me a break! Do you really believe that the things Paul mentions here are of any value in a war that threatens to consume and destroy us?”

Well, yes.

I'm not suggesting that we withdraw from the political process or roll over and play dead. God has graciously given us laws and a variety of secular institutions and opportunities which enhance our lives and provide for the protection of the church. But our ultimate confidence and trust must be in something greater still.

In the list of nine, we begin with “purity” of motivation and behavior. Paul has already referred to his renunciation of dishonesty and his refusal to stoop to underhanded and crafty tactics (cf. 2 Cor. 4:2). Simple purity has a power to effect change and to commend the gospel far beyond any political shenanigans.

The “knowledge” or “understanding” in view probably refers not simply to theological insight but to the practical discernment in Paul as he dealt with his enemies in Corinth.

Instead of retaliation and revenge, “patience” is the order of the day when facing the indignities and insults of others. Whereas “endurance” (v. 4) is courage and perseverance while suffering unjustified adversity, “patience” or “longsuffering” is “the forbearance which endures injuries and evil deeds without being provoked to anger (Jas. 1:19) or vengeance (Rom. 12:19)” (Harris, 474).

Simple “kindness” accomplishes far more than we can imagine. Ann and I were recently in the town home of a dear friend whose new neighbor had embarked on a drunken, obscene, and violent tirade. Well past midnight, he banged on the walls and shouted vile threats. The next day, our friend took a plate of cookies next door, declaring her intentions to be a good neighbor and available to help if ever there were a need. The sinful rage of the night before has yet to reappear.

The reference to the “Holy Spirit” strikes some as odd, appearing as it does in the middle of a list of Christian virtues. Some say it is the human spirit in view, but every other time Paul uses the adjective “holy” with the noun “spirit” it refers to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the difficulty is minimized if we understand Paul to be referring to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, his manifestation via charismata. Or perhaps he included this reference to the Spirit on realizing that the purity, understanding, patience and kindness he mentioned are themselves the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22-23).

The phrase “in genuine love” calls for some explanation. The Greek term *hupocrites*, from which we derive our word “hypocrite”, was used in reference to a person who played a part on the stage, an actor, someone who took on a role different from what they are in reality. Thus when this word is negated (*anupokrito*), as it is here in 2 Cor. 6:6, the word carried the force of “not good at acting on a stage” and thus “free from pretense” or “without hypocrisy” and thus *sincere* or *genuine*. Love that is feigned or that masks selfish desires only destroys. Love that is authentic commends the gospel and changes others.

In light of Paul’s earlier reference to “the open statement of the truth” (2 Cor. 4:2) as something that characterizes his ministry, the phrase “by truthful speech” (lit., “by the word of truth”) here in v. 6 most likely has in view his declaring of the truth of the gospel. Certainly his relationships with others were characterized by truthfulness and honesty, but his focus here is on the power of the preached and proclaimed truth of a dying and rising Savior.

Needless to say, “the power of God” alone explains how all of the preceding and following are even possible. Without the energizing presence of God, nothing we say or do will have effect.

Yes, we are in a battle. No, our weapons are not physical, mechanical, political, or computerized. Rather, we fight “with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left” (v. 7). A soldier in Paul’s day would typically wield a sword in his right hand, designed for attack, and a shield in the left for defense. As such, he was fully prepared to rebuff an assault from any direction.

Life changing, world winning power is not ultimately found in the speed of a computer chip or the most sophisticated satellite technology, far less in the military strategies of global super-powers. True power, the power that brings life to dead souls and hope to despairing hearts, the sort of power that renews and uplifts and sustains, the power that commends and adorns the gospel, is found in the simple but supernatural weapons of a pure heart, a clear head, forbearance, kindness, the manifestation of the Spirit, a love untouched by hypocrisy, truthfulness in speech, and the power of God energizing the weapons of our warfare for the sake of his kingdom.

It may not be “cool” or “sexy” or the sort of life that captures the attention of the media or power-brokers in our world, but it’s what God has given us. It worked for Paul, and I trust it will work for us.

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: The Treasure, Quite Simply is Christ (2 Cor. 6:8-9)

On June 22, 1750, Jonathan Edwards was fired. After twenty-four years of ministry at the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, twenty-one of which as senior pastor, America’s greatest pastor-theologian was dismissed by an overwhelming vote of the male membership (women were not allowed to vote).

Edwards’ response? After enduring years of theological wrangling, bitter opposition, rancorous slander, and malicious gossip, one might have expected him either to wallow in self-pity or lash out in angry recriminations. Not Edwards. One observer described his reaction in these memorable words:

“That faithful witness received the shock, unshaken. I never saw the least symptoms of displeasure in his countenance the whole week, but he appeared like a man of God, whose happiness was out of the reach of his enemies and whose treasure was not only a future but a present good, overbalancing all imaginable ills of life, even to the astonishment of many who could not be at rest without his dismissal [i.e., dismissal]” (quoted in Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 327).

Edwards was a pastor, not an apostle, but he had obviously learned much from the experience of Paul. Something was at work in both men that elevated their happiness beyond the grasp of even the most vicious of their enemies. A treasure of inestimable value more than compensated for “all imaginable ills of life.”

Nowhere does Paul say it with greater clarity than here in 2 Corinthians 6, as he describes a ministry and a life characterized by great endurance in the midst of afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger (vv. 4-5). He responded to such trials with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, love, and truth, all in the power of God through the Holy Spirit (vv. 6-7).

The paradox of Paul’s experience is nothing short of stunning: “through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (vv. 8-10).

I want to briefly note the first six of these paradoxical pairs in vv. 8-9.

We love it when others hold us in high regard (“honor”, v. 8). A good reputation is easy to live with. But “dishonor” is something else. When people hold opinions of us shaped by misinformation and unjustified criticism, we either respond in kind or retreat to a defensive posture. All too often our emotional equilibrium fluctuates with our public opinion poll. We’re high when the numbers are. When the polls go down, so do we.

Paul was neither over-inflated by “praise” nor destroyed by “slander” (v. 8). He could enjoy public affirmation without becoming dependent upon it. He was largely unaffected by what others thought of him. This is stunning when one considers the customary defamation he endured at Corinth. Notwithstanding his most humble and self-sacrificial posture, he was often excoriated and denounced.

They accused him of being fickle (2 Cor. 1:17), of being motivated by worldly ambition (10:2), and for falling short in regard to physical appearance and lacking verbal eloquence.

“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true” (v. 8). Paul is in good company here, as Jesus himself was regarded as a deceiver by his enemies (cf. John 7:12; Mt. 27:63). Yet his calling was genuine (Gal. 1:1,15-16), his message was authentic (2 Cor. 4:2; 6:7), and he consistently spoke the truth (2 Cor. 11:31; Rom. 9:1; Gal. 1:20; 1 Tim. 2:7).

What does he mean in saying he was “unknown, and yet well known” (v. 9)? Some say this refers to views of Paul held outside the church (he’s an unknown quantity, insignificant, uncelebrated, easily ignored) versus inside the church (respected and acknowledged). More likely a human perspective is being contrasted with a divine one. The false teachers in Corinth, together with some of the members there, refused to recognize him as an apostle. But God did (cf. 2 Cor. 1:1). And it’s the latter’s opinion that mattered to Paul.

There may even be a more personal dimension to this contrast. Yes, he was largely unknown to the world, a “nobody”, if you will. Yet God knew him, loved him, and cherished him as a good and faithful son. “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:19; cf. John 10:14), Paul wrote to young Timothy. And the apostle was no exception. Others may forget who I am, says Paul, but the Lord Jesus has written down my name in the Lamb’s book of life (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3)!

Yes, we are constantly exposed to life-threatening circumstances (“as dying,” v. 9), yet “we live” (cf. 2 Cor. 1:8-9; 4:11ff.; 1 Cor. 15:30-31; Acts 14:19-20). We are “punished” but “not killed” (v. 9), knowing that “all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11).

What has to happen in the human heart to make such a life possible? How does one attain to this perspective? Is there a formula? A magical incantation? A prayer to pray? A task to perform? What accounts for the presence of joy rather than bitterness in Paul’s soul? How was he able to keep his happiness “out of the reach of his enemies”?

For this, we must return to the words of that astute observer in 1750. His “treasure,” this man wrote of Edwards, “was not only a future but a present good, overbalancing all imaginable ills of life.” Something was of such immeasurable value that Edwards happily let go of all earthly goods and gain. There was something he prized above the praise of men. The root of his dependency on the accolades of others was severed by his delight in a far surpassing pleasure.

Edwards (like Paul) was captivated by a treasure so radiant that he was blinded to the light of fool’s gold. Its glorious sound rendered him deaf to the slander of his enemies. The sweetness of this “present good” turned sin sour in his soul. He had experienced a joy so satisfying and a pleasure so all-consuming that “all imaginable ills of life” dwindled in their capacity to embitter or enslave. The treasure, quite simply, was Christ.

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: Spiritual Schizophrenia (2 Cor. 6:10)

The dictionary entry on the word “Schizophrenia” defines it as “a situation or condition that results from the coexistence of disparate or antagonistic qualities, identities, or activities” (<http://www.dictionary.com/>). Another entry reads: “a state characterized by the coexistence of contradictory or incompatible elements.”

Given these definitions, there is a sense in which Christianity gives every appearance of being schizophrenic! There are in the Christian life, and in that of the apostle Paul in particular, situations or conditions or states of mind, if you will, that strike those outside the believing community (and more than a few on the inside as well) as being disparate or antagonistic or contradictory or incompatible.

If that sounds outlandish to you, meditate for a few moments on Paul's description of his life and ministry as portrayed here in 2 Corinthians 6:10. I am, said Paul, "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." Although I am "poor" I make "many rich". I have "nothing," he confessed, yet I possess "everything"!

I want to say, "Make up your mind, Paul! You can't have it both ways. Sorrow and joy are incompatible. Poverty and riches are disparate, mutually exclusive states of being." No wonder non-Christians think we're crazy.

What accounts for Paul's admittedly odd perspective on life? Is he emotionally unstable, a dreamer, a man who's lost touch with reality, or someone who has a deep and profound grasp on what is of ultimate value? I suggest it is the latter.

Let's be clear about one thing. If there is no life beyond the grave, Paul is certifiably insane. If this world is all there has been, is, or ever will be, it is senseless to speak of joy in the midst of suffering or to regard oneself as wealthy in the face of poverty. The value system that accounts for Paul's point of view is one shaped by a belief in the reality of eternity, a life everlasting in which never-ending good prevails over evil, an existence in which the beauty and splendor of Jesus Christ provide ceaseless and ever-increasing satisfaction that transcends anything this current life can afford.

Paul's "sorrow" was very real. His anticipation of eternal joy did not negate the hardships of life, but it did make them bearable. We misunderstand the apostle, and Christianity as a whole, if we believe the Bible is telling us to ignore pain or pretend that it is less agonizing than it is.

The source of his sorrow was multi-faceted. He felt "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (Rom. 9:2) over the lost estate of his Jewish brethren. His often tumultuous relationship with the Corinthians was the source of "much affliction and anguish of heart" (2 Cor. 2:4). Then there was "the daily pressure" of his "anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28), not to mention the sadness he felt upon seeing Christ scorned and mocked, as well as his own sufferings from persecution and slander.

Yet, we are told, he was "always rejoicing"! This can only be explained in light of two factors. First, he must have believed that even the worst of circumstances and the most oppressive of trials were subject to an overriding and gracious providence. Were it not for his belief that "all things work together for good" for those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28), he could not have rejoiced simultaneously with his sorrow. It was not wishful thinking but *the most rigorous spiritual realism* that enabled him to endure, knowing that whatever befell him was sovereignly designed to facilitate his conformity "to the image" of God's Son, Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29).

Second, there must have been a deep and abiding well of spiritual refreshment from which he regularly drew that provided his heart with incomparable and life-sustaining satisfaction, something so fascinating, enthralling, and captivating that no root of bitterness could thrive or disillusionment could displace. As we've seen repeatedly, it was the goodness and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ himself (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Even when joy in the present felt incomplete and distant and strained, Paul labored to savor the foretaste of future delight in God, no doubt constantly reminding himself that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). Clearly, true joy is not

dependent on pleasant circumstances. It is possible to rejoice in a way that is genuine and real and sincere and unfeigned while yet enduring trials that in themselves have the potential to bring only misery and despair.

The apparent spiritual schizophrenia continues when Paul describes himself “as poor, yet making many rich.” What could he possibly mean by this? Obviously both can’t be literal, for Paul would never have thought of himself as increasing the financial wealth of the churches where he ministered. That would simply have never factored into the goals he set for his work among the congregations he founded.

Paul probably meant it literally in saying that he was “poor”. In his first letter to the Corinthians he wrote: “To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands” (1 Cor. 4:11-12a; an important reminder for all aspiring apostles!). Paul’s work as a tentmaker only provided him with basic necessities. But his poverty was a matter of choice. He wanted to avoid any possibility that people might think he was in the ministry for the money (2 Cor. 11:7-12; 1 Cor. 9:12,15,18), and he never wanted to be a burden to his converts (see 2 Cor. 11:9; 12:13,16).

Yet, he was not in the least bothered by his material deprivation, for it served to enhance the opportunity to “enrich” others spiritually and for eternity. This verb is used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:5 where he describes the believers in that church as “in every way” “enriched in him [i.e., in Christ] in all speech and all knowledge” (cf. 2 Cor. 9:11).

Although Paul himself lacked earthly riches he delighted in imparting to others “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8) and the “surpassing worth of knowing” Christ Jesus as Lord (Phil. 3:8; cf. Rom. 10:12; 11:12). He labored among the Colossians to make known “the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

Nothing could be more obvious than this: if Christ is not himself a treasure of incomparable worth, a prize of incalculable value, a source of ineffable satisfaction, material hardship will only serve to embitter and harden your heart.

Finally, though I have nothing, said Paul, I possess everything! But he surely had a few worldly possessions, and would never have claimed ownership in sin and ill-gotten gain. This is undoubtedly rhetorical hyperbole, designed to highlight the infinitely superior blessings of Christ and the age to come. Although he owned little in terms of transient and worldly goods, Paul considered himself opulent when it came to things eternal and of infinite spiritual value.

“So let no one boast in men,” he wrote to the Corinthians. “For *all things are yours*, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21-22).

If we are able to embrace a thoroughly biblical worldview, a perspective in which the values of eternity impinge on the present, we will always appear schizophrenic to those who do not know Christ as Lord and Savior.

Without him, sorrow trumps joy, and material gain becomes our only reasonable goal. With him, joy flourishes in the midst of all, even financial lack or physical pain.

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: Dealing with Dysfunction in the Family of Faith (2 Cor. 6:11-13)

I recently received an e-mail from a reader who was lamenting the tragic absence of love in the body of Christ. He was grieved by the failure of many to take seriously the words of John, who insisted that “whoever loves God *must* also love his brother” (1 John 4:21b).

The failure of the Church to love its own is an ugly blemish on the public face of Christianity. All of us have seen it, and many have felt its pain. There are countless reasons why this is a such a problem: fear, lack of trust, suspicion, past failures, grudges, unforgiveness, anger, broken promises, most of which is fueled by pride and ambition and insecurity and greed and gossip and, well, perhaps you should just fill in the blank.

One of the many strengths of Scripture is its refusal to sugar-coat the relational dysfunction among its more prominent characters. I suppose some might have preferred that Paul not publicize his struggles with the Corinthians. They wonder why the Spirit preserved for us so many ugly episodes. I, for one, am glad he did. How else are we to learn principles for conflict resolution? How else can we grow in relational harmony and overcome the many obstacles that hinder our witness to a lost and dying world?

That there was a palpable tension between them is evident from Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13. Although brief, close examination of this paragraph will yield great wisdom for resolving our interpersonal struggles in the body of Christ. Paul writes:

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

Most of us have, at one time or another, been on both sides of this sort of dispute. Like the Corinthians, you may have developed a lack of trust for leadership in the church. Fueled by gossip and misinformation, you may have grown to doubt their sincerity or their honesty. Perhaps you view them as power hungry and insensitive to the needs of others. One of your friends or family members may have been hurt by excessive authority or unjustly removed from a place of ministry. As a result, there is little room left for them in your heart.

On the other hand, you, like Paul, may have been the object of unwarranted criticism. Notwithstanding your best efforts and most sacrificial labors, people misinterpret your motives and impugn your character. You may wonder, “After all I’ve done and everything I’ve given, you’d think they’d give me the benefit of the doubt.”

Regardless of which side of the fence you’re on, it hurts. You expect Christians to live by a higher standard. You’re shocked when their behavior differs little from what you encounter in the world at large. When your best efforts to put things right come up short, it seems only reasonable to withdraw, shut down your heart, elevate your guard, and wait for them to make the first move.

It’s clear from Paul’s words in this passage that he didn’t embrace that philosophy. His approach to resolution is refreshing and highly instructive. We would do well to imitate his strategy. I’d like to highlight five principles at work in Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians from which we can learn much.

The first thing that stands out to me is the deeply personal and direct way in which Paul addresses them. Did you notice his use of the word “Corinthians” (not simply “you”), as well as his appeal to them as his “children” (only elsewhere in Gal. 3:1 and Phil. 4:15 does he address his readers by name)?

The reference to them as “children” is not a rebuke, as if Paul is saying that they are acting “childishly.” Rather, these believers are his children “in the faith” (cf. 1 Tim. 1:2). Paul led them to Christ. He was the human instrument in their spiritual birth. This is an affirmation of intimacy, not indignation.

It’s not easy to speak in such terms to those who’ve hurt you badly. Your instinct is to keep them at arms length and not to expose yourself until you’re convinced of their good intentions. But Paul won’t have it. He is open and up front about his feelings for them. This is not a guarded or dispassionate command on his part but a heartfelt appeal from a spiritual father to his spiritual children.

A second principle to note is the transparent and honest way in which Paul lets his heart be known. He holds back nothing. He hides no motives, employs no facades, and avoids all pretense. He turns away from verbal manipulation and speaks the truth without embellishment or flair.

The fact that Paul’s frank speech is an accurate and utterly honest expression of his intentions and beliefs and desires is indicated by the second phrase, “our heart is wide open.” Jesus declared that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt. 12:34), and Paul hopes the Corinthians will hear his words and thereby feel the pulse of his soul. He knows they are still suspicious of him. He knows they harbor ill will. He knows they doubt his sincerity. He knows they are afraid of entrusting themselves to him. Yet this is no hindrance to his complete openness.

The phrase, “we have spoken freely to you”, is literally “our mouth is open toward you,” a graphic and pointed way of describing utterly unrestrained, vulnerable, frank speech. Paul here is uninhibited and free in expressing his affections.

Third, be prepared to correct false notions or unwarranted beliefs that others have about your feelings. Paul knew they thought he loved them little (cf. 2 Cor. 11:11). So here he uses a figure of speech called *litotes*, in which a positive is emphasized by use of the negative. Thus when he says “you are not restricted by us” he means, in effect, “you enjoy the fullest devotion possible,” or “we love you with unbridled affection,” or more literally, “I have not allowed you to be squeezed out of my heart.”

Fourth, identify the problem. Don’t skirt around the issue or pretend that it is less painful than it is. Be specific in focusing on the source of the tension. You may be wrong, but at least it will let them know how you perceive the situation. In this case, Paul is convinced that the problem is not that he lacks affection for them but that they have shut their hearts toward him. “You are restricted in your own affections,” he says. The word translated “affections” is a graphic one in Greek (*splanchna*), referring to the inward parts, the viscera or entrails, if you will. It is obviously a metaphor for the emotions or feelings or deep affections.

Paul unashamedly declares that they have failed to reciprocate his love. His feelings for them are honest and sincere and passionate. He has not closed himself to their needs or their pain. But they in turn have not returned the favor. If he is open, they are closed.

Fifth, Paul makes an urgent and heartfelt appeal to them. In return for opening his heart to them he pleads that they will open theirs to him. “In medical terms,” notes Harris, “an enlarged heart is a dangerous liability; in spiritual terms, an enlarged heart is a productive asset” (490).

Paul doesn't bludgeon them with heavy handed ecclesiastical power but speaks to them as a friend and a father. He doesn't play the apostolic trump card to enforce his will, but entreats and pleads with tender passion. His spirit isn't official, but personal.

Does it always work? Sadly, no. There will always be people in the church who, in a perverse sort of way, derive pleasure and sinful satisfaction from the alienation they have both caused and continue to perpetuate. Often their identity is wrapped up in the offense they carry. For others, to release it and reconcile requires a vulnerability they are not yet willing to embrace.

But their weakness is no excuse for our reluctance. Paul, it seems clear to me, was determined to obey his own command, painful though it be: "Repay no one evil for evil," he wrote to the Roman church, "but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:17-18). That's not easy to do, but the alternative is simply not an option for the one who says he "loves God" (1 John 4:21).

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: The Life of the Church in the World vs. The Life of the World in the Church (2 Cor. 6:14-16a)

What does it mean to be *in* the world but not *of* it? How is a Christian supposed to relate to those who despise and ridicule the name of Christ? To what extent are we to engage with the surrounding culture? Should a Christian shop at a store owned by a cult? Is the boycott an essential and effective expression of the church's protest against immorality in our society?

These are tough questions for which quick and overly-confident answers are unwise, and usually wrong. Although the culture has changed and the circumstances often differ greatly, the approach advocated by Paul in the first century still has relevance and binding moral authority for us today.

"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14a). One hears people quote this passage almost as often as John 3:16, but with considerably less clarity and understanding. What does Paul have in mind? What is the background to his exhortation, and how does it apply to us in the twenty-first century? The situation in view was not a new one for Paul, having addressed it earlier in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 and 8:1-11:1. Some professing Christians in Corinth were visiting the temple cults of any number of the pagan religions in the city, perhaps even engaging in the sexual activities (temple prostitutes, etc.) associated with their "worship".

This problem was most likely the reason for Paul's emergency second visit to Corinth and the follow-up "Severe Letter" (see 2 Cor. 2:1-4; 10:1-6; 12:20-13:2). Therefore, the "unbelievers" that he describes in this passage were unconverted Gentiles who were involved in worship at the Greco-Roman mystery cults of Corinth (cf. the use of the word in 2 Cor. 4:4). His command, then, would be for Christian men and women to withdraw from such unholy and immoral alliances. But does the *principle* behind the imperative extend to other issues that we face today? Yes, but we must proceed cautiously in our application.

Although Paul is not thinking about marriage in this text, certainly the principle would prohibit a Christian entering into such a covenant with a non-Christian (1 Cor. 7:12-15,39). Just as we are commanded not to put asunder what God has joined together, we must be diligent not to join together what God has put asunder!

Sadly, though, some have applied this passage in ways that Paul never sanctioned and that would, in effect, make it difficult even to live, much less work, in a secular society.

For example, there's no indication that Paul is forbidding or condemning all contact and association with non-Christians (something he declares impractical, if not impossible, in 1 Cor. 5:9-13). Indeed, he anticipates the presence of unbelievers in the worship services at Corinth and instructs them not to do anything that might drive them away (1 Cor. 14:22-24).

Neither is he forbidding or condemning business relations with non-Christians. Whereas I believe it is biblically permissible (necessary?) to do business with a non-Christian, entering into a legal partnership with one calls for discernment and caution.

Paul is in no way forbidding or condemning friendship with non-Christians. If anything, I believe he would encourage them. But even then, *how close is too close* when it comes to fellowship with the unregenerate?

There is certainly nothing here that would forbid or condemn association and cooperation with other Christians who may disagree with you on secondary issues (contra the attitude in much of early Fundamentalism in western religious culture). And contrary to what some have suggested, if two unbelievers marry and one subsequently comes to faith, he is not instructing the latter to terminate the relationship (see 1 Cor. 7:12-15).

As far as contemporary application is concerned, the *separation* Paul has in mind between Christians and non-Christians is *spiritual* and *moral*, not *spatial*. The principle is this: ***enter into no relationship or bond or partnership or endeavor that will compromise your Christian integrity or weaken your will for holiness or cast a shadow on your reputation*** (see James 4:4-5).

Some of the questions we must ask ourselves, in the effort to apply this principle, would include:

"When I am with these non-believers, do I find myself in situations where I am unduly and dangerously exposed to temptation that may get the better of me?"

"When I am with non-Christians, do I find it easier than at other times to compromise on ethical matters? Do I find myself judging as 'grey' what I would call 'black' if I were with Christians?"

"Does my association with non-Christians tend to make me less vocal about my faith or less visible in my stand for Christ?"

"When I am with non-Christians, does conversation focus primarily on things of the world, or is there also opportunity for discussion of spiritual matters?"

"Does my association with non-Christians serve as an offense to others or a cause of reproach to the gospel?"

There then follow in 6:14b-16a five pointed, rhetorical, questions, each of which calls for the answer: "None whatsoever!"

"For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" (2 Cor. 6:14b-16a).

These are designed to explain why it's important for believers to be cautious about too close association with non-believers. Those committed to righteousness have no partnership with people given to lawlessness. Those who live in the light of God's revelation are not to be yoked with those who walk in spiritual and moral darkness. Quite obviously, Christ and the devil agree on nothing and have no harmony with one another. This is the only place in the NT where the word "Belial" occurs. Its Hebrew counterpart occurs in the OT with the meaning "worthlessness" (e.g., Deut. 13:13; 15:9; 2 Sam. 22:5; Ps. 18:4), while in the inter-testamental literature it was used to describe a personal opponent of God.

Likewise, a believer and non-believer share no *spiritual* common ground. As Philip Hughes has said, "The unbeliever's life is centered on self, the believer's on Christ; the treasure of the one is here on earth, of the other in heaven; the values of the one are those of this world, of the other those of the world to come; the believer seeks the glory of God, the unbeliever the glory of men" (251).

However, Paul is not denying our common humanity or suggesting that there is literally nothing that we share. As Calvin wisely reminds us, "when Paul says that the Christian has no portion with the unbeliever he is not referring to food, clothing, estates, the sun, and the air, . . . but to those things which are peculiar to unbelievers, from which the Lord has separated us."

Finally, if the OT prohibited the introduction of idols into the temple of God, *how much more* horrendous is idolatry in the life of the believer (v. 16a)! Are we not ourselves the only temple in which God shall ever dwell (see 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16b; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:5)? Yes!

The significance of the believer as the temple of God will be taken up in the next meditation. Here I only wish to emphasize yet again the importance of discernment when it comes to forging relationships and partnerships with the unsaved. There is rarely an easy answer that fits all sizes and circumstances.

What is most important to remember, then, is that this is "not a call to create a Christian ghetto, but a summons to purify the Christian community. *Paul does not have in view the life of the church in the world, but the life of the world in the church*" (Hafemann, 292). The former is both good and inevitable. The latter must be avoided at all costs.

CHAPTER SIX MEDITATIONS: We are the Temple of the Living God! (2 Cor. 6:16b- 7:1)

On the one hand, I don't want to be guilty of unwarranted exaggeration. On the other, I'm hard-pressed to think of a more theologically important, spiritually encouraging, and eschatologically controversial statement than that of Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:16b. "***For we are the temple of the living God!***"

The starting point for understanding this crucial concept is the Old Testament narrative in which we find the visible manifestation of the splendor of God among his people, the *shekinah* of God, his majestic and radiant glory without which the Israelites would have been left in the darkness that characterized the Gentile world.

Before Solomon's temple, God revealed his glory in the tent or tabernacle which Moses constructed. It was there that God would come, dwell, and meet with his people. "Let them make me a sanctuary," the Lord spoke to Moses, "that I may dwell in their midst" (Ex. 25:8). It was there that "the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and [there that] the Lord would speak with Moses" (Ex. 33:9). It was there that "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34). The tabernacle was where the people of Israel would draw near to hear from God, to worship God, and to stand in his presence (cf. Lev. 9:23; Num. 14:10).

What was true of the tabernacle during the days of Israel's sojourn was even more the case in the temple of Solomon. When the Ark of the Covenant was brought "to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim" (2 Chron. 5:7), "the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God" (2 Chron. 5:14).

It is against this preparatory backdrop that we read the stunning declaration of John that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The word translated "dwelt" (*skenoo*) literally means "to pitch a tent"

or "to live in a tabernacle" and unmistakably points back to the OT when God's glory took up residence in the tent of Moses, the portable tabernacle, and eventually in Solomon's temple.

John's point is that God has now chosen to dwell with his people in a yet more personal way, in the Word who became flesh: in Jesus! The Word, Jesus of Nazareth, is the true and ultimate *shekinah* glory of God, the complete and perfect manifestation of the presence of God among his people. The place of God's glorious dwelling is the flesh of his Son! The glory which once shined in the tent/tabernacle/temple of old, veiled in the mysterious cloud, was simply *a foreglow, a mere anticipatory flicker*, if you will, of that exceedingly excelling glory now embodied in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ (cf. Col. 1:19).

God no longer lives in a tent or tabernacle built by human hands, *nor will he ever*. God's glorious manifest presence is not to be found in an ornate temple of marble, gold, and precious stones, but rather in Jesus. Jesus is the glory of God in human flesh, the one in whom God has finally and fully pitched his tent. The point is that the temple of the Old Covenant was a type or foreshadowing of the glory of Christ. It was the place where the Law of Moses was preserved, of which Jesus is now the fulfillment. It was the place of revelation and relationship, where God met and spoke to his people. Now we hear God and see God and meet God in Jesus. It was the place of sacrifice, where forgiveness of sins was obtained. For that, we now go to Jesus. Israel worshipped and celebrated in the temple in Jerusalem. We now worship in spirit and truth, regardless of geographical locale (cf. John 4:20-26).

To meet God, to talk with God, to worship God, you no longer come to a building or a tent or a structure made with human hands. You come to Jesus! Jesus is the Temple of God!

But the story doesn't end there. *We, the church, are the body of Christ* and therefore constitute the *temple* in which God is pleased to dwell. The *shekinah* of Yahweh now abides permanently and powerfully in us through the Holy Spirit. When Paul describes this in his letter to the Ephesians, he refers to Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, "in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:21-22). Simply put, God's residence is "neither a literal temple in Jerusalem nor simply heaven, but the Church, of which the Gentile Christian readers in Asia Minor were a part" (Lincoln, 158). This formation of the temple is an on-going divine project, a continuous process (see also Eph. 4:15-16). Although it may seem strange to speak of a "building" experiencing continuous "growth", Paul surely wants us to conceive of the church as an *organic* entity. Recall that Peter also refers to believers somewhat paradoxically as "*living stones*" (1 Peter 2:5)!

Again, Paul grounds his appeal to the Corinthians in this truth: "Do you not know that **you are God's temple** and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and **you are that temple**" (1 Cor. 3:16-17). In his plea for sexual purity, he again asks: "Or do you not know that **your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you**, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20; see also the graphic portrayal of this truth in 1 Peter 2:4-10).

All this brings us to Paul's consummate declaration in 2 Corinthians 6:16b: "**For we are the temple of the living God!**" To reinforce this point he conflates several OT texts (Lev. 26:11-12; Isa. 52:11; Ezek. 11:17; 20:34,41; 2 Sam. 7:14) which prophesied of a coming, end-times temple, one of which is Ezekiel 37:26-27 where God declares: "I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Let me come straight to the point. ***Beginning with the incarnation and consummating in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, together with the progressive building of his spiritual body, the Church, God is fulfilling his promise of an eschatological temple in which he will forever dwell.***

But what of the literal, physical temple in Jerusalem? Has it lost its spiritual significance in God's redemptive purposes? To answer this we must return to Jesus' words in Matthew 23-24.

In judgment against the Jewish people, the temple complex was abandoned by our Lord, both physically and spiritually, as he departed and made his way to the Mount of Olives. "Your house," said Jesus, "is left to you desolate" (Mt. 23:38). It has thus ceased to be "God's" house. When Jesus died and "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Mt. 27:51), God forever ceased to bless it with his presence or to acknowledge it as anything other than *ichabod* (the glory has departed).

Just as dramatically as Jesus had entered Jerusalem (Mt. 21:1-17, the so-called "Triumphal Entry") and its temple, he now departs. This once grand and glorious house of God is now consigned exclusively to them ("See, **your** house is left to **you** desolate," Mt. 23:38). The echoes of God's withdrawal from the temple in Ezekiel's vision reverberate in the words of our Lord (see Ezek. 10:18-19; 11:22-23). The ultimate physical destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 a.d. is but the outward consummation of God's spiritual repudiation of it. Jesus has now left, never to return. Indeed, the action of Jesus in departing the temple and taking his seat on the Mount of Olives (Mt. 24:3) recalls Ezekiel 11:23 where we read that "the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city."

This applies equally to any supposed future temple that many believe will be built in Jerusalem in the general vicinity where the Dome of the Rock now stands. It's entirely possible, of course, that people in Israel may one day build a temple structure and resume their religious activities within it. The political and military implications of such, not to mention the religious furor it would provoke, are obvious.

Whether or not this will ever occur is hard to say, but if it does *it will have no eschatological or theological significance whatsoever*, other than to rise up as a *stench* in the nostrils of God. The only temple in which God is now and forever will be pleased to dwell is Jesus Christ and the Church, his spiritual body.

It would be an egregious expression of the worst imaginable *redemptive regression* to suggest that God would ever sanction the rebuilding of the temple. It would be tantamount to a denial that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It would constitute a repudiation of the Church as the temple of God and thus an affront to the explicit affirmation of Paul here in 2 Corinthians 6 and elsewhere.

Finally, let's not lose sight of the practical point Paul is making. It is because we as the church are the place of God's presence in the world today that we must guard ourselves against any and every expression of idolatry. We are not simply another cultural institution or "social service meeting the felt needs" of our neighbors. "Instead, as the new covenant people of God, the church is the 'family of God' united by a common identity in Christ and gathered around her common worship and fear of 'the Lord Almighty'" (Hafemann, 292). May our lives always reflect that glorious and gracious identity.

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