

“THE LIFE OF AN AMBASSADOR” (2 Corinthians 6:1-10)

At a High School assembly, representatives from the four branches of the military each gave speeches seeking to recruit students. The Navy representative went first and spoke for 15 minutes of all the advantages of being in the Navy, all the travel and opportunities that would be available to them, and invited them to “come see the world.” The Army representative got up and also talked for several minutes of all the bonuses the Army offered, and challenged the students to “be all that you can be.” The Air Force recruiter also gave his pitch, inviting the students to “aim high – come join the Air Force.”

The last representative, the Marine, walked up to the podium, looked out over the assembly, and said, “There are probably only three of you here who have what it takes to be a Marine. If you think you are one of those three, come see me afterward.” And he went and sat down. After the assembly, students stood in line to talk to the Marine. His straightforward approach struck a chord with students looking to give themselves to something of great value – something that required everything they had.

This story comes to mind as we look at our passage today in 2 Corinthians 6 where the Apostle Paul calls us to give our lives to the greatest cause on earth – it’s a hard job, it’s not always glamorous, but it’s worth all the sacrifice it requires. Our calling, we’re told in chapter five, is to be ambassadors of reconciliation – once we’ve been reconciled to God through Christ, we seek to persuade others to be reconciled.

In Paul’s day an ambassador was an official representative of a king, who acted on behalf of the interests of the king and His kingdom. As believers we are ambassadors for Christ, acting on His behalf and representing Him to the world. Some, like the Apostle Paul and his missionary team, are called to lead the charge and devote themselves fulltime to the gospel ministry, but each of us plays a part on the gospel team – we’re all called to share the gospel with others – to give our time, talent, and treasure to support the work of the ministry – and to live a life that reflects well on Christ.

In verses 1-10 of chapter 6 Paul describes the life of an ambassador, using himself and his missionary team as examples. The Apostle Paul, of course, was unique and experienced things we likely never will, but the underlying principles of ministry he modeled are the same for every ambassador who represents Christ. In these verses we see four marks of an ambassador.

The first mark is **passion**. In verses 1-2 Paul writes... “As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”

Paul knew that to be an effective ambassador requires passion and zeal to fulfill the work God has given us to do. In verse one Paul urges the Corinthian believers to not receive God’s grace in vain. Grace is the undeserved kindness and mercy we received from God in saving us – and vain means to be empty or worthless. When Paul came to Corinth and preached the gospel, many received God’s grace and we’re saved – but Paul is concerned that God’s grace was not having it’s intended effect in their lives.

As their spiritual father Paul wants to light a fire under them to get about the business of serving the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 15:10b-11 Paul speaks of how God's grace gripped his heart and compelled him to serve God... "His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." Serving God is hard work, but is the most rewarding work you'll ever do. God calls us to work hard now because the day is coming when there is no longer an opportunity to work.

This leads us to the second mark of an ambassador, and that is **urgency**. In verse 2 he writes... "For he says, 'In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." Paul quotes from Isaiah 49:8 where the prophet Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel held captive in Babylon and says, "Today is the day of God's favor – today is the day of your salvation – if you cry out to Him, He will hear you and deliver you."

Paul takes this verse and applies it to the time of God's favor in sending His Son to deliver us from captivity to sin. While the people of Israel had to wait for deliverance to come, Paul says salvation in Christ has come and is available right now – now is the time to respond to His free gift of grace and put your trust in Him. The reason you need to respond now is there's coming a day when God will not hear you or help you, and the opportunity for salvation will end.

You and I, right now, are living in the age of grace – we're living in a time period where anyone at any time can cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness and He will grant it. The age of grace began at the cross when Jesus died to make reconciliation with God possible, and the age of grace will end either when you die or Christ returns to the earth in judgment. Right now the door to salvation is wide open, but one day that door will close. Hebrews 3:8 says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Respond quickly to the Lord because you don't know what tomorrow holds – there's a sense of urgency to be saved and reconciled with God right now before it's too late.

There's also an urgency as Christ's ambassadors to take every opportunity to spread the gospel. In John 9:4 Jesus said, "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work." God has given each of us a certain work to do on earth until He comes, and we're only given one lifetime to get it done. While we're on earth, it's daytime – it's time to work – but nighttime is coming when we will no longer have the opportunity to do what God has called us to do.

I'm not a prophet, but all that is happening in the world points to the fact that we are in the last days of the last days before Christ's return. Now is not the time to be idle or complacent – it's not the time to retreat and isolate from the rest of the world – it's time to serve the Lord with everything you've got. If God has been prompting you to do something – to talk to someone about the Lord, to invite someone to church, or to get involved in a ministry of the church, why wait? Now is the day – work for the night is coming.

The third mark of an ambassador for Christ is **integrity**. In verses 3 Paul writes... "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited." To be effective ambassadors we must conduct ourselves in a way that doesn't discredit Christ or our ministry.

Paul was well aware that people were going to be offended by his message and reject it – he could live with that – but he didn't want his conduct to be the reason people rejected the gospel. For Paul it was all about the message, and he knew that the way he lived was closely linked to what he said. He didn't want to put up any unnecessary obstacles or barriers that would keep someone from accepting the gospel.

Whether they know it or not, the world is watching us and they expect that Christians will act like Christians, and that what we say will match how we live. When our lives and our words contradict each other, we shouldn't be surprised that people will be turned off to the gospel. The number one reason people give for not going to church is that the church is full of... hypocrites – they show up on Sunday morning and act one way, but I've seen them on Saturday night – I've seen them out on the river – I've seen them at meetings – I've seen them at work – I've seen them chew people out – I've seen them go back on their word – and hypocrisy becomes an unnecessary obstacle to the gospel.

Another obstacle Paul was always mindful of was money, and he did everything possible to convey to people that he wasn't in the ministry for money. As he went from town to town, he didn't end his sermon by saying, "We're now going to pass the offering plate." It wasn't that he wasn't deserving of financial support, but he wanted to remove any possible obstacle he could that would create a barrier to the gospel, and he worked as a tentmaker in order to support himself.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 he says, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." As ambassadors we want to build bridges to people, and we do that by living quiet, dignified, responsible lives in order to earn the respect of those outside the faith. They may still reject our message, but the reason will not be us – that is Paul's point.

The fourth mark of an ambassador is endurance. The life of an ambassador is not easy, and it requires resiliency and perseverance – the kind that is built up over the course of many years. In verses 4-10 Paul gives a long list of things he and his missionary team endured in ministry and he begins in verse 4 by saying... "Rather (as opposed to being a stumbling block), as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance..."

One of the reasons Paul wrote the book of 2 Corinthians was to defend himself against opponents who were trying to discredit him in the eyes of the Corinthians, and wants to set the record straight as to who he is and what his ministry is about. Paul was not interested in patting himself on the back about what a great apostle he is – but he was concerned about the gospel. He knew that if his enemies could discredit him, the gospel he preached would be discredited. So Paul says, "Here's my defense – here's my resume – my track record – don't look at what my opponents say, look at what the evidence of my life shows."

All that he says in verses 4-10 revolve around the word "endurance," which means "to bear up under difficult circumstances." It's the ability to remain in a difficult situation without giving up. In the sport of running there are sprinters and marathoners. Sprinting only requires that you're fast, but running a marathon requires endurance – it requires that you keep running despite the pain and cramps and the potholes and the barking dogs.

As an ambassador, endurance is the quality that makes you keep on being faithful to your calling – you fulfill God's purpose for your life despite the difficulty. Paul's not talking about a grin-and-bear-it kind of endurance, but a joyful, triumphant endurance where you serve God with a smile on our face and joy in your spirit. It's the same attitude that enabled Jesus to endure the cross for the joy set before Him of seeing people saved. It's wasn't just endurance, but a joyful endurance.

Paul gives three categories of endurance, each with nine examples, making it very symmetrical. We could spend hours talking about each of these 27 qualities of endurance, but you're going to get hungry here in a bit, so we'll just touch briefly on each. I encourage you to take the time this week to go through these qualities on your own and meditate on them as they apply to you.

The first category, in verses 4b-5, is **endurance in suffering**... “in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger.”

The first three have to do with general suffering we all face in life... troubles, hardships, and distresses. Trouble, or afflictions or tribulations according to some translations, was something Jesus promised would be a part of this age. Hardships are the hard, unpleasant, disruptive things that occur as the result of living in a fallen world. Distresses has the idea of being in a narrow, confined space – as we would say... being between a rock and hard place – you feel trapped by circumstances beyond your control.

The next three words describes the kind of suffering that comes at the hand of others... beatings, imprisonment and riots. Paul was beat up a lot – three times he was beaten with rods, five times he received 40 lashes, and one time was nearly stoned to death. You can imagine how torn up and disfigured his body was, not to mention the daily pain he lived with. Paul was also in jail a lot – at least seven times that we read about. He also faced angry mobs on at least seven occasions – one time he was seized by a mob of thousands in Ephesus who shouted at him for two hours. He lived with continual opposition.

The final three words describe self-inflicted suffering that Paul brought on himself for the sake of the gospel... hard work, sleepless nights and hunger. The ministry is work, and in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 Paul says he worked night and day to preach the gospel to them. Some think he did his gospel ministry during the day and worked as a tentmaker at night, which explains why he had many sleepless nights – it wasn't because of insomnia, it was because he often didn't have time for sleep or he was on the run from enemies trying to kill him. There were also times he went hungry because he was on the move or because he was low on funds.

It's not likely that you or I will suffer all that Paul did, but if you are truly doing the work of an ambassador, you will suffer something – you may lose a friend, you may lose a job – all who do the work of Christ will suffer – and if Paul endured all that he did and kept going, I can do the same with the limited opposition I face. The early Christians were amazingly resilient and counted it a privilege to suffer for the name of Christ – they didn't run from it but embraced it – and we are called to do the same.

The second category of qualities is found in verse 6-7, and have to do with **endurance in character**... In the midst of all his trials, Paul responded to them with the following graces... “in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left.” While it would have been easy for Paul to cave to the pressures and trials of ministry, it only caused him to rely more on the Lord and grow stronger in character.

First, he says he acted in **purity**. He did not want to taint his message with any kind of sexual or moral impurity – he didn't want to have any accusation made against him that might reflect negatively on Christ or the gospel.

Second, he faced the difficulties of ministry with **understanding**. With time and experience, we should all be growing wiser – and through all of his trials Paul sought to be wise in the way he handled himself and ministered to people, and just as Jesus went out to lonely places to seek wisdom and guidance from His Father, Paul relied on the Lord to size up each situation he encountered and take the appropriate action.

Third, he practiced **patience**. Patience is the ability to respond to stress and pressure in a calm, Christ-like way. It's a virtue that can only be learned on the job – by being around people or circumstances that test your patience. Patience is a wonderful fruit of the Spirit that is developed by slowing down, bearing with difficult people and circumstances, and not letting yourself be stressed-out by the irritations and inconveniences of life.

Fourth, Paul grew in **kindness** – another fruit of the Spirit. Kindness means... being kind and pleasant and easy to be around.

Fifth, Paul says he endured in the **Holy Spirit**. It is the Holy Spirit within you that produces all the character qualities mentioned here. Every believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but spiritual growth doesn't happen automatically – it comes through yielding to the Spirit's control and being sensitive to His work in you and through you.

Another fruit of the Spirit, number six, is **sincere love**. "Sincere" means that you love people genuinely – you don't try to control or use or manipulate them, but you love them with a deep, agape love that seeks their highest good. Sincere love is a key factor in evangelism – as the old saying goes: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Then, number seven, there is the quality of **truthful speech**. Wherever Paul went he faithfully proclaimed the simple truth of the gospel – he didn't preach one thing to one group of people and another thing to another group – he didn't adapt his message to cater to what was popular or avoid opposition – he spoke plainly and openly the truth of how people can be reconciled to God through Christ.

Number eight, he ministered in the **power of God**. He did not rely on clever tactics and rhetorical skills to win people to Christ – he knew that any fruit that came from his ministry, it would come through continual reliance on the power of God through prayer.

Along with this, number nine, Paul says we minister with **weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left**. The reason ministry is so hard is because we serve as ambassadors on Satan's turf and everything we do is met with opposition. We try to win souls for Christ and Satan tries to keep souls in darkness and sin. We're engaged in a spiritual battle, and we endure the battle with weapons of righteousness. Most likely this speaks of living the right way – in purity and patience and kindness and so forth. Romans 6:13 says, "Offer every part of yourself to God as an instrument of righteousness." Having weapons of righteousness in the right hand and left hand means that a righteous life equips us to withstand any trial from any direction.

The third category of enduring qualities that characterize an ambassador is **endurance in perspective**. In verses 8-10 Paul lays out nine paradoxes or opposites of ministry. He says, "Here's how you appear in the world's eyes, and what they think is true of you" then he says, "Here's what's really true from a spiritual perspective." We read... "through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

The first paradox is "glory and dishonor." Paul received his fair share of both glory and dishonor – some people loved him and some people hated him – some people close to him betrayed him – but he didn't let the highs and lows of life distract him from his ministry. He knew that no matter how much he might be dishonored in this life, he would be honored by God in the next life for his faithful service.

“Through bad report and good report.” Whenever you stick your neck out and publicly proclaim your faith as Paul did, you’re going to have both positive and negative things said about you. Paul learned to not let good reports go to his head, or let the bad reports destroy him.

“Genuine, yet regarded as imposters.” Paul enemies said he was a false apostle leading people astray, and he was in good company because Jesus was also regarded as a deceiver. Some said, “He’s a good man,” and others said, “He’s leading people astray.” But the trump card for both Paul and Jesus is that they spoke the truth, and the truth they spoke was backed up by the life they led.

“Known, yet regarded as unknown.” One of the hard things in any relationship is when people say they know you, but they really don’t. They have a surface perception of who they think you are, but it doesn’t match the reality of who you really are. Paul remained focused not on what people thought of him, but what God thought of him, because God is the only one that truly knew him inside and out, and God’s opinion was all that mattered.

Next, he says, “Dying, and yet we live on,” and “Beaten, but not killed.” Paul life was always on the brink of death, and yet he was like a cat with nine lives. One day he would be beheaded – according to tradition – but he lived unafraid. His philosophy was: “To live is Christ, and to die is gain. If God wants me to keep preaching the gospel, I’ll do so gladly – if I’m killed for preaching the gospel, I’ll be with the Lord. Either way I’m good.”

“Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” As ambassadors there are times of intense sorrow – sorrow for those you witness to but remain spiritually hardened, and sorrow for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are not growing in their faith, as well as the personal sorrow of pain and loneliness. Yet through it all Paul lived with a deep sense of joy in knowing that God was in control and that on resurrection day all sorrow will turn to laughter and rejoicing. It’s the same thing you feel when you lose a loved one – there is intense sorrow, yet at the same time there is hope you will see them again and that hope gives you peace and joy.

In the final two contrasts, Paul says, “Poor, yet making many rich” and “Having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” Being poor was one of the hardships Paul endured to further the cause of the gospel, and yet it was his willingness to go without that enabled him to preach the gospel, to start churches, and spiritually enrich the lives of people. Paul had nothing in the way of material possessions, yet he possessed all the spiritual riches of Christ – and in the eternal scheme of things, that’s all that really mattered.

From a human perspective, being an ambassador for Christ is not very appealing – no one wants to sign up for the kind of trouble, hardship, and affliction Paul describes here. But once you’re reconciled with God, His grace should overwhelm you that you gladly and passionately give your life for the one who gave His life for you. And you will feel a sense of urgency to tell people the good news of salvation and be the kind of person in word and deed that represents Christ well. And through Christ’s power you will endure and stick to your mission, regardless of the cost. That’s our calling – it’s a hard and glorious calling that gives meaning and purpose to life. Go forth this week and be ambassadors of reconciliation to the glory of God.