



The Favorable Time

2 Corinthians 6:1-2

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Good morning. If you have been with us these past months, you know we have been going through Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, 2 Corinthians. We have arrived this morning at chapter 6. As we look at this text (chapter 6, verses 1-2), I want to, from the outset, remind you once again that the chapter and verse divisions are artificial. They are not inspired by the Word of God.

Paul, as he was writing, did not stop and write a big 6 here at the beginning of this. That's important for us to realize, because chapter and verse divisions are helpful (you'll know where to turn this morning), but we also can't think we've left chapter 5 behind. Especially this morning, there is a very close connection between the fifth and sixth chapters.

So, we are now to look at God's Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Second Corinthians 6, beginning at verse 1:

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.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord, we come to you this morning and ask that you would open up your Word to us. Even as you by your Holy Spirit have inspired the apostle to write these words, so now keep your promise in your Word to illuminate our minds and hearts, that we might be affected by them, that we might know you and what you have done and that we would love you more and more, O Lord. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

One of the most well known of all Christian hymns is that great hymn penned by John Newton, "Amazing Grace." It's so well known that you can see "Amazing Grace" everywhere. You see it in places that aren't even associated with church. It is perhaps the best known hymn at any funeral. You can be out and about and hear the tune, well known, "Amazing Grace."

But the question I have for you this morning is...*Is grace amazing to you?* Are you thrilled by the idea of grace? Does God's grace affect how you live every day? For the apostle Paul, grace was everything. He could not stop talking about grace. That's what we see here this morning at the beginning of chapter 6. Paul has just given us the gospel in its summary form at the end of chapter 5, and now he begins to go on about God's grace and the salvation that comes to us and how we should look and pay attention.

So, this morning, I'd like us to see three things from our text. First, the *danger of ignoring God's grace*. There is indeed a danger in ignoring God's grace. Secondly, we see the *testimony of God's grace*, that God's grace is not something that comes to us new. It is consistent in the character of who God is. Then, finally, we see the *need for God's grace* in your life and in mine. The danger of ignoring God's grace, the testimony of God's grace, and the need for God's grace.

Danger of Ignoring God's Grace

Let's begin, then, by looking at the danger of ignoring God's grace. Paul begins our passage this morning by saying, "Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain." As I said earlier, this passage is very closely connected with chapter 5, especially the end of chapter 5. The grammar itself highlights it. You'll see in verse 1 this English word *then* is actually a translation of two Greek transitional words. We could have translated it *and also* or *even so* or just simply *then* as our translators do. The idea is that there is a connection. This flows out of what Paul has just said.

The language also highlights the connection. Paul says, "We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain." That language should be very familiar to us from where we just were last week. God makes his appeal through us. That appeal comes from God through us. Therefore, Paul says, "Now you're going to hear our appeal." It shouldn't surprise us.

The subject matter is closely connected to what we have just seen in the last few weeks, because Paul has been talking about reconciliation, about the God who reconciles sinners to himself in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the subject of our text this morning: reconciliation. Paul just uses another word to describe what God is doing. Here he calls it *salvation*, but it's the same concept: sinners being made right with God, sinners being freed from their sins, their sins not accounted to them, as Paul said. Not counting their trespasses to them, but rather, putting them on Christ.

So, Paul tells us we are not to receive the grace of God in vain, and the first question we must ask is... *Who is Paul talking to?* This is a more complex question than you might think at first glance. If I were to give you all of the ink spilled by all of the commentators on this, it would take quite some time. The commentators get all in a consternation about who Paul is talking to, because after all, Paul is writing to the Corinthian church, and a church is made up of believers.

So how does he address a church and say, "Do not receive the grace of God in vain"? But I think you also need to remember that, previously, at the end of that chapter, Paul was talking to those who needed to be reconciled with God. Paul was rehearsing in the hearing of the Corinthians what they should be preaching and ministering to others with. In verse 20: "Be reconciled to God."

Paul's audience is really twofold. It's the church at Corinth, but it's also any sinner in need of grace. This dual aspect is important for us, because it reminds us that the grace of God has two objects: both the unsaved and the saved. Often, we think only about the unsaved with respect to grace. In the church, we see God's grace as being something for them out there, not for us.

Now, there is no mistake here. The unsaved need grace. We'll get there in a few moments. But we cannot forget that we are never beyond *our* need, as believers, for grace. So the second question we might ask is... *What is grace?* Why do we need it? Paul makes this appeal that the grace of God not be received in vain. *Grace* is one of Paul's favorite words. He uses it more than anyone else in the Bible.

As you might expect, his most frequent use of the word *grace* is in the book of Romans. He uses the word 21 times, because Romans is, of course, a summation of the gospel of grace. It is a very heavily doctrinal book. We would go to the book of Romans to look and find Paul's doctrine of justification, Paul's doctrine of adoption, Paul's doctrine of sanctification, Paul's doctrine of election. Romans is your go-to doctrinal book, so we would expect Paul to talk a lot about grace there.

The interesting thing is that 2 Corinthians is by far and away the second most common place where Paul uses the word *grace*. That's interesting, because as we've seen over and over again, 2 Corinthians is a very emotional letter. It's a very pastoral letter. Paul is not writing a treatise for a theological text. He's not even primarily giving a call to the lost. He's speaking to a church, yet he talks about grace over and over again... 14 times in this letter. He does it so much because I think grace is synonymous with the gospel.

Grace is the unmerited favor of God. You might think of it *this* way: grace is God's blessings that we do not deserve. As a matter of fact, we actually have undeserved them. We don't stand before God with a blank slate or as innocent to receive his grace. We stand before him condemned as sinners. The concept of grace is often set against the idea of reward or work, which is something earned.

If you are currently employed and are going out and working and, at the end of the week on a Friday, you're either handed a paper check or a deposit shows up in your bank account, you are not surprised. You are not unbelievably grateful. You don't run up to your boss and shake his hand and say, "Oh, this was so generous of you to pay me for this week's work." No. You expect it. If the wrong numbers are on the paycheck, you actually go to your boss and say, "You shorted me \$100. I worked hard this week. I earned every penny that I should be paid." That's the idea of work, of reward or merit.

Grace, on the other hand, is something completely unearned, completely undeserved. This is where the close connection between chapter 6 and chapter 5 is important. The grace of God is his reconciling work of reconciling sinners to himself. It is, as he says in verse 19, not counting their sins against them. God does this by the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus for sinners. We saw that in chapter 5, verse 21.

For our sake, Jesus became sin. "God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." It is the grace of God that puts our sins on Jesus and Jesus' righteousness on us. You recall last week we said that's the summation of the gospel, the great transaction: our sins put on Jesus, his righteousness put on us. The only reason that happens is that God in his grace brings it about.

So, what would it mean for the Corinthians to receive grace in vain? This phrase *in vain* means empty or to no value or to no result. What Paul is doing here is giving a warning that it is possible to see or to even acknowledge God's grace without it having an effect on you. In short, it is living like grace doesn't make a difference to me, that

grace doesn't matter in my life. It is the failure to live as someone who has been changed by grace. It is wasting your time. It is being unserious about your faith. It is failing to live with Jesus as the most important thing in your life.

Paul was warning the Corinthians because they were showing signs of this. They were competing with one another. They were listening to voices telling them to go back to the law. They were taking Jesus for granted, and they were forgetting the mission Jesus had given to them. This can be just as true of the church today. One of the world's great lies is that people today are different and better from people in the past. The truth is that our problems are the same as the problems faced by the Corinthians.

The most important problem they faced, and we face, is a spiritual struggle with pride. We think we have moved beyond Jesus. Perhaps we needed Jesus in the past. Maybe we were weak before, but we're beyond that now. We've cleaned up our act. We're ready to go. So we live as if grace doesn't matter. We don't pray. We don't acknowledge how helpless we are. We don't look for the Lord to provide for our needs.

Stop and think for a moment about your own life. Is it centered on grace? Do you acknowledge your need of the grace of God every single day? Do you live as someone who has been changed forever, someone who has been brought from death to life, someone who has had their sins forgiven and received the righteousness of Christ? Are you living like you have been radically changed or are you living like everyone else around you? Your speech and your actions should be different.

But Paul is not just speaking to believers here. He *is* writing to the church, but the church also is not made up of all of those who are saved. Just like you here this morning, the church back then had different kinds of people. There were those who were new to the story of Jesus. There were young people who had not yet fully considered Jesus' claims on their lives, and there were those who were mistaken about what it means to be a Christian. Just as that was true in Corinth in the first century, so it is true in Katy in the twenty-first century, and all of these kinds of people need to hear about their need for grace.

There's also a sense here in which Paul is teaching us. Even those in the church who have genuinely experienced grace need to be reminded about those who have not yet. So, Paul is making his appeal to the lost here. He is teaching us how to appeal to the lost. "Be reconciled to God." We have to not only hear that appeal; we have to imitate it. So Paul tells each person not to receive God's grace in vain. The grace of God has already been shown. You remember that God is the initiator. God is not waiting on sinners to seek reconciliation. He is the one who sent his Son, the great reconciler, to save the lost.

Further, he has given the ministry of reconciliation to his people to seek out the lost. If you are within the sound of my voice this morning, you know this. You are hearing about God's grace because God's people are committed to bringing that message to you today. I am preaching it. God's people have sacrificially given so that you might hear it. Their testimonies confirm its truth. So we, with Paul, appeal to you, beg you, to receive the grace of God. God has announced pardon and reconciliation. He has announced healing and life. Do not ignore that call.

It is far too easy to receive the grace of God in vain. You could act as if grace is something that someone else needs. You decide that you are far too sophisticated for grace, far too cool for grace, far too together for grace. You act as

if grace is something you might take up later in life, that now you're just too busy. Maybe later you will need it, but not right now. Do not fall into that trap. Don't reject God's provision in Christ. Don't act like everything is fine and you have no need for Jesus. The message of reconciliation is for you right now.

Testimony of God's Grace

Paul then reminds us that God has held out this grace over and over again, and he does this by quoting a passage from Isaiah 49. It is very interesting how he does this. He could have taken any number of passages from the Old Testament to talk about grace. He could have even gone to other places in the book of Isaiah. Why does he take Isaiah 49 here?

Well, it's interesting, because many think he was reminded of this passage by a similarity of words. In the Greek, the word *receive* sounds like the word for *favorable* that Paul quotes from the Greek translation of Isaiah 49. They're not exact, but they're pretty close. It's as if Paul is saying to himself, "Receive the grace of God not in vain. And what do I mean *receive*? Oh, I know! I'll use Isaiah 49." It jogs his memory.

The point is that this is not an exclusive reference. This is not the only place in the Bible that you could go to hear about God's grace. It's just an easy one that comes to mind to Paul. As a matter of fact, we might say the Bible is so full of the concept of God's grace that a mere word association can bring up a verse for Paul.

Now, Paul does not want the appeal to God's grace to come from his own authority. He wants you to know that God himself is calling you. That's why he starts verse 1 by telling you that he is working together with God. "Working together with him, then, we appeal to you. This appeal comes to you not from our own strength, not from our own wisdom, but it comes from the Lord. We are his instruments." "We are his ambassadors," we might say from the previous text.

This is God's work from the very beginning to the very end. Not only is God the one who is reconciling sinners by grace; he is bringing that grace to them by his testimony. Also note that, for Paul, when the Bible says something, God speaks. You might have missed that if you read quickly through the beginning of verse 2. Paul quotes the Bible, Isaiah, and he does not say, "Isaiah says..." He says, "For he (God) says..." For Paul, the Bible and God speaking is the same. There is no difference.

The prophet Isaiah wrote these words, but he understood the exact same thing Paul understands. In Isaiah 49, Isaiah begins this passage with "Thus says the Lord: 'In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.'" It is God himself who calls you to his grace. It is God himself who calls you to be forgiven. Paul is looking back to Isaiah to show you that this is always God's way.

Now look at the way Paul quotes Isaiah. Does he say, "Over 700 years ago the prophet Isaiah wrote..."? Does he say, "An ancient text has said..."? No. He writes, "For he *says*..." Present tense. God is speaking *now* through his Word, *now* through the prophet Isaiah. God is speaking right now to you. This is not a historical summary. We are not reviewing the philosophy of Paul or Isaiah. In your ears right now, this minute, God is speaking. Will you hear him?

God says that he has listened, and the word here means he has heard and responded to the cries of sinners. He has responded in what way? Well, he tells us in verse 2. By helping. "In a day of salvation I have helped." How has he helped? Well, again, the text tells us. He has helped with salvation. That's how God helps. Are you wandering about through life now? Do you wonder where meaning is found? Do you find yourself doing things you know are wrong, but you can't stop?

Do you have guilt that keeps you up at night? Do you want hope? God offers that to you right now in Jesus. He is calling you out of your sin and shame. He is telling you that there is a solution for your sin, for your guilt, and that solution is the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Jesus died that sinners might have life. Will you receive that grace? Will you put your trust in Jesus to be reconciled to the God who speaks life and hope to you right now?

Need for God's Grace

Paul then closes with an appeal to recognize the need for God's grace. He has warned us against ignoring God's grace. He has told us that God himself is speaking to us about his grace, and now, make no mistake, he tells us now is the time to hear and embrace God's grace. Do you see the urgency in the passage this morning? Paul practically repeats Isaiah at the end of verse 2. It's as if he has decided he can't improve upon the words. He says, "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

Paul cannot help but be urgent in his plea. Not once but twice he tells us "Behold! Look! Look now. Get up. Pay attention." It's as if a man were in the middle of a wonderful Sunday afternoon nap, completely unaware of what is going on in the world, but perhaps this hypothetical man is taking his Sunday afternoon nap in an area in which wildfires are raging on the West Coast. To sleep is a disaster. To sleep is certain death.

Now what would you do for this man? Would you send him a text message? "Please get up." Would you walk up and whisper in his ear? "You might want to get up now." No! You would shout, "Get up! Flee from what is coming. Death is upon you. Waste not a moment. Don't gather up your things. Don't take notes. Get up and flee!" That is the urgency with which Paul is pressing the grace of God on you and me.

That's what it's like today if you don't know Jesus Christ. You have no time to waste. Don't worry about finishing school. Don't worry about paying off your house. Don't worry about getting your fill of fun. "Behold, now," Paul says. Not later...*now*. Now is the day of salvation. There is no waiting. Your sins are set against you. The judgment before you is sure. There is no hope. You are guilty and condemned before the wrath of God.

Don't put your hope in the fickle sayings of our culture or your friends or polite society. Be like Pilgrim when he saw his burden and said, "I am condemned to die, and after that to come to judgment; and I find that I am not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second." Now is the very day of salvation. Not tomorrow, not next week...today.

The need is urgent, and the need is also clear. Now is the favorable time, God says. Some translations say *acceptable time*. The idea here is that it is not just a good time, but it is a time to be accepted. It is a time or day of salvation. Paul understood this well as one who needed salvation. He takes Isaiah's word for *favorable* and expands on it.

Now you might miss that, because our translation uses the same word: *favorable*. But when Paul says *favorable*, he expands it. He puts a preposition in front of it, and then he puts an adverb in front of that. He intensifies this word. You can almost hear the joy in his voice. "Now is the favorable time. Look! Look! Can't you see the light blazing over there?" Paul says.

These two verses form the capstone of Paul's description of the gospel. What Paul tells you now is that today is the day of salvation. He is summarizing what that day means. He is saying that you can no longer look at Jesus the way the world does, that you have to view him in the knowledge that you are a sinner, alienated from God, that your sins are more than sufficient to condemn you to an eternal judgment, to bring the wrath of a holy God upon you.

You cannot clean up your act. You cannot make things right. You cannot ignore reality, but you can receive the grace of God. God's grace does not need to be in vain. God's grace can be sufficient for you. It can transform you. Jesus has died so that sins would be forgiven and so that the dead might live. You can live just by trusting in Jesus. Will you do that now?

We often wonder when the right time is to do something. We don't want to be late, but often we're afraid of being too early also. God tells you that you can never be too early for his grace. Today is the day of salvation. Today is the day the Lord is reaching out to you. Today is the perfect day to come to Jesus.