



## What Gospel Ministry Looks Like

2 Corinthians 6:3-10

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I'd like to draw your attention once again to Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, 2 Corinthians. If you start at the New Testament and turn your way to the right, you'll go through the Gospels, the book of Acts, Paul's letter to the Romans, 1 Corinthians, and then 2 Corinthians. We are now in chapter 6. Last week, we looked at the first two verses of chapter 6, and this week we will take up as our text 2 Corinthians 6:3-10.

As we come to God's Word, I would encourage you to hear the Word of the Lord as coming from God himself. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians 6, beginning at verse 3:

*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.*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, great Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray that you would open up your Word to us, that as we study your Word, we would be struck with awe and wonder at who you are and what you have done in Jesus Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We come now to this point in the letter of chapter 6 in the midst of Paul's extended digression about the gospel and gospel ministry. What we have seen in the past few weeks is, first, that Paul has described the *ground of the gospel* in chapter 5. The ground of the gospel is the finished work of Jesus Christ. It is that great transaction in which our sins are placed on Christ and his righteousness is placed on us.

Then last week, we looked at the *urgency of the gospel*, that we are not to receive the grace of God in vain, that today is the day of salvation. Now before us in *this* text, Paul describes what the ministry of the gospel looks like. This text has application for all of us. The most immediate application is for those who are, like myself, ministers of the gospel. We have several of those in our congregation. It also has application to those who are called to minister in the name of the gospel of grace; that is, our elders and our deacons.

It also has application for those who are studying for the gospel ministry, to know what the ministry holds for them. But it's also applicable in families, to fathers and mothers as they lead their families, to Christians as they do gospel ministry in their workplaces, in their colleges, in their schools, in their neighborhoods. In short, while Paul is speaking primarily about himself, what he is telling us is true for each and every believer, because every believer is a servant of Jesus Christ and a minister of his gospel.

So, this morning, I would like us to see three things from Paul's description about the ministry of the gospel. The first thing we see is the work itself; specifically, what Christians are to do and not do as they go about the work of the gospel. Secondly, we see the persistence the servant of Christ is to have in the ministry of the gospel. Then, finally, we see the reaction to the gospel ministry. The *work of the gospel ministry*, the *persistence in the gospel ministry*, and the *reaction to the gospel ministry*.

## **The Work**

Let's begin, then, by looking at the work of the ministry itself. As we pick up here in verse 3, we have to see that what Paul is doing is continuing his thought from verse 1. You don't see it in your Bibles, in your translations, but you may want to think about verse 2 beginning with an open parenthesis and ending with a closing parenthesis. Paul begins this chapter by saying, "Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain."

Then he gives a quotation from the Old Testament, and he applies it to the church before him as a description of what he means in this appeal. Now in verse 3 he picks up what this appeal looks like. The main verb in this sentence is actually *appeal* in verse 1. What we see in verse 3 and verse 4 are two verbs. They are participles...helping verbs, if you will. They describe the circumstances, the means, what Paul is telling us to do as we make this appeal. The appeal is the main verb, but we have instructions as to how this appeal is to be made.

The first thing Paul tells us is that the minister does not get in the way of the appeal. He says, "We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry." In the background to this idea is the truth that the gospel in itself is offensive to the world. Merely telling people that they are sinners in need of grace and that they cannot work their way into God's good graces is offensive to sinners.

Paul had told the Corinthians this exact thing in his previous letter in 1 Corinthians, chapter 1. He says, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." So, the background of this is to know that the gospel itself is a barrier to sinners. It is offensive. So it is important, it is crucial, that servants of the gospel not add additional barriers to the gospel, that we not add obstacles to the gospel.

Now, what does Paul mean by an *obstacle* here? He means something that is in the way, something that would stop people from coming to Christ. The word itself means an occasion that leads to a false step. I want you to picture in your mind's eye if you have ever been out at a restaurant or a store or some public building that has what we might call a *halfstep* somewhere. It's hard to even call it a *step*, because it's not a full step. You don't see it.

You may be getting down from a booth in a restaurant or you may be walking across the floor at a store, and all of a sudden, you lose your balance. You stumble. You might even fall to the floor because an obstacle has been placed

in your path. What Paul is telling us is "Do not put these kinds of obstacles in front of people. Do not make it harder for them to see the gospel, to embrace the gospel, to hear the gospel."

These obstacles are offenses. They are off-putting things. They are things we do that stand in the way of the message of grace. That's why Paul tells us we are not to put these obstacles "so that no fault may be found." The idea here is that if fault is found, the gospel will flounder, and the fault cannot be in the gospel. The fault is not in the Lord who is perfect in every way. The fault is not in our Lord Jesus Christ who never sinned, nor was any malice ever found in his mouth. The fault is not in the message, which is true, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The fault would be in the messenger bringing the message.

The idea here is one of fault, of ridicule that can be placed on the gospel because of the messenger or the minister. It's interesting that the Greek word for *to find fault* is related to the name of the Greek god for abuse. Yes, the Greeks had a god for just about everything, including abuse. None of them were true gods. They were all idols, but the god of abuse, of ridicule, had a name, and that's what Paul is saying here. "Don't bring ridicule on the gospel. Don't allow unbelievers to heap abuse on God and his message and his Savior."

You see, the minister cannot be abusive. He cannot be such that the world actually takes pleasure in rejecting the gospel. Now, we can think of some examples of this. The minister, Christians in general, must not lead an immoral life. Nothing blunts the call to come to a holy God like an unholy messenger. Now what would this look like? Perhaps being unfaithful to your spouse, not caring for your children, being untruthful all the time or deceptive, being dishonest with money. Actions do indeed speak louder than words. We cannot hope to speak the gospel while everything about our lives betrays the gospel.

Another obstacle that could be in the way of the gospel is pride. After all, the message of the gospel is one of humility and grace. If the message we bring is that we are all sinners before the throne of God, that we all need to come to the cross of Christ, that there's nothing we can do that can make God love us, but we must fall upon Jesus and his mercy, how can we then bring that message by saying, "I'm better than you. Don't you know that I know more? Don't you know that I'm smarter? Don't you know I'm better equipped?" Pride is antithetical to the gospel. It's an obstacle.

We could also have an uncaring attitude. As we bring the gospel to others, do they sense an ulterior motive in us, that we're somehow trying to get an advantage by bringing them the gospel? Perhaps additional business for our company. Perhaps just simply having figures or numbers to say how many people we've shared the gospel with this week. This attitude is something that stands in the way of the gospel. You cannot think that others do not see this kind of attitude. Is ministry about people and their needs? It has to be. We cannot seek gain or fame or satisfaction in gospel ministry. Gospel ministry is about people and caring for them.

Now, none of these obstacles change the gospel, but they *can* stop people from coming to Jesus. The idea is that we are not to put ourselves in the way of the ministry. This does not mean you need to be perfect. We all know that we are not perfect. But it means you cannot live a life that draws negative attention to yourself while you hope to minister the gospel. No one is going to ignore immorality or pride. It will be a barrier to others. We need to think about that when we act.

Paul now turns from the negative to the positive. He had said that we are to put nothing as an obstacle to the ministry, and now he says: "...but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way." The idea is that the ministry is not to be a small compartment of your life. Instead, ministry flows out of who you are and the entirety of your life. You know the gospel, and the gospel has changed you. As a result, you can bring the gospel to others.

Paul uses this word *commend* often. We've seen it in chapter 3, verse 1; chapter 4, verse 2; and chapter 5, verse 12. Its basic meaning is to bring together. From there it means to introduce or recommend someone to someone else. It could even mean to provide evidence or proof of a person, to prove who they are to another. As servants of God, we are to commend ourselves and the ministry to others.

This does not mean we go about telling people how great we are. It doesn't mean we are to insist that we are the smartest or that we are better than other people. After all, these are examples of obstacles to the gospel. What Paul means is that we are to live in such a way that, as others observe us, it helps the gospel. We have examples of Paul giving us this in verse 6.

The first is he says we are to live by *purity*. This is more than a lack of immorality, although in today's world, even a lack of immorality would stand out. What he means here is personal integrity. We are to be known as honest people before others. Others should trust us, should see us as being pure, honest, and with integrity.

Then Paul says we are to live by *knowledge*. The *knowledge* here has a twofold reference. The first is it means we are to know what we are talking about. As believers serving the Lord Jesus Christ, we are to know the gospel. You are to know your Bibles. You are to know Jesus. Think about this. When something breaks in your home, who do you call to help you? I can tell you who you *don't* call. You don't call me. I won't fix your dishwasher or your hot water heater or your lawn mower or anything mechanical, because I don't have the knowledge. That's not in my area.

What I do is I call someone who has expertise in that area who I know can tell me something that's of value and of worth, who can help me. So it is with the gospel. We must know the Scriptures in order to share the gospel with others. This is the main reason why, in our day and age, right now in your life, you should be studying your Bible every day. You should study your Bible to know the Lord, to grow closer to him, and to be able to share him with others. You can only do that if you know the Scriptures, if you know God.

Now, there's a second aspect to this knowledge: we are to know people. The ministry is not an abstract message that is forced onto everyone in the same way. We have to focus on people, on their needs, on the objections they raise, on the experiences they have. We need to know people, to study people, to learn people, to help apply the gospel to their particular situation.

The third thing Paul says is we are to live by *patience*. This is something that only shows itself over a period of time. By *patience*, Paul means we are to bear with other people, especially difficult people. Have you ever had to have patience with someone who was eminently agreeable, who did whatever you asked and was very encouraging and was a source of love and joy all the time? No. We don't call that *patience*. That's easy.

You have to be patient with people who are difficult, who challenge you, who don't listen to you, who respond badly to you. That's who you need to be patient with. Why? I think Paul tells us this because that gives others a picture of God. Isn't that what God does with us? He's patient and longsuffering with us. He bears with us in our thickheadedness, our hard-heartedness, our love for sin.

The fourth thing Paul says is that we are to live by *kindness*. We are to show a gentleness in our demeanor and in our speech. It is not right for Christians to be as rough as the world. Let me give you a very particular application. What do you look like on social media? Do you look like everyone else in your neighborhood? Do you try to be as rough and tumble as everyone else?

Do you try to respond in such a way that shuts everyone down, that demeans people just to win an argument? Or are you kind? Do you share the truth in a way that's winsome? Do you try to challenge people's worldviews in a way that will point them to the Scriptures? I'm not saying you can never disagree with anyone, but there is a way to disagree that is kind and opens up your view to others.

The fifth thing Paul says is that we are to live with *genuine love*. Not just a love for others, but a *genuine* love. People need to see that there is no concealed agenda. We're not trying to just raise attendance at the church or tell everyone at the Bible study what a great week of evangelism we've had or to somehow get a new business partner or to gain resources from someone else. We must love people genuinely, unfeignedly.

## **The Persistence**

So, the first thing we see about the ministry is that our lives must not get in the way of the work but must rather support it. The second thing we see about the ministry is that ministry is hard. When Paul says, "We commend ourselves," he means by our lives and actions, but he also means by the way we face difficulties. The Christian life is not one of ease and comfort. We are seeing that more and more in America today, but that has been the norm for believers around the world for centuries.

In verses 4-5, Paul gives some specifics about how we commend ourselves to others when we are in trials. Paul is a masterful writer, and he is inspired by the Holy Spirit, so he gives us a comprehensive list. He starts with a general principle, and then he moves on to three categories, and in each of the three categories, he gives us three examples. You can't escape the idea that the ministry is hard.

First, he says that the overriding principle is *great endurance*. This is a different word than the word for *patience* in verse 6. It is an endurance, a steadfastness, that keeps focused on the goal in spite of the problems in the way. He also explains that this is great or much. It does not fade in the face of hard circumstances. We might say, "When the going gets tough, the believer gets going." It *did* get tough for Paul, and it *will* get tough for us, tough in a number of ways.

The first category Paul gives to us are general sufferings, afflictions, hardships, calamities. These are the pressures of life that come as the gospel clashes with the world. There are pressures that come down upon us from outside as the world battles against the gospel. Then there are hardships or necessities, when you're not sure what to do, when you're not sure you can bear up under the circumstances.

Then thirdly, there are calamities or distresses, being closed in by troubles, feeling like there's no place to turn, like the whole world is against you. Do you experience these? They're found in homes, in workplaces, in schools, neighborhoods, and in the public square. So long as the world is hostile to Jesus and hostile to the gospel, the believer will have these trials.

The second category Paul gives to us is persecutions that were inflicted on him by enemies...beatings, imprisonments, riots. Paul wants to remind us that there is more than a clash of worldviews going on here. There is more than a philosophical debate at hand. There is a hostility against Christians that you will experience. He describes them as beatings, imprisonments, and riots.

If we look at the book of Acts, we will see all of these. Paul was beaten over and over again just for preaching the gospel. Five times, he tells us, he was whipped; three times he was beaten with rods; once he was stoned and left for dead. Now, I don't mean to say that as you go into the office this week, someone is going to punch you in the nose, but I do think you need to be prepared for hostility directed against you, for attempts made to demean you, to hurt you, to harm you.

Paul also tells us that he was imprisoned. We know the famous incident in Philippi where Paul was thrown into jail and he sang for joy and the Philippian jailer was saved, but he was jailed in many other places as well. I heard a very interesting interview with Pastor John MacArthur in California this week. He was responding to a question that said, "The government is telling you you cannot have a worship service. What will you do?"

He said, "We're going to worship God." He said, "Listen. When Paul went from town to town, he didn't ask what the hotel in town was like. He asked what the jail was like, because he knew he was going to spend some time in the jail." He said, "I'm okay with having a jail ministry. I haven't had a jail ministry yet in my life." Now, do I expect today to be thrown into jail? No. Do I think that day may come? Yes.

Do I know that my brothers and sisters around the world are experiencing that right now? Absolutely. There is a Reformed minister who pastored a church in Chengdu, China, who is now serving a decade in jail simply for preaching the gospel. That story could be repeated in India, in Burma, in Africa, in other areas of the world. The world hates the gospel, and it attacks its messengers.

The third category is a list of hardships Paul took on. This last trio...labors, sleepless nights, and hunger...are things Paul voluntarily took on as he ministered the gospel to others. It's not that he wanted these things, it's not that he sought them out, but it's rather they were a direct result of doing gospel ministry. Paul worked hard, *very* hard. He worked so hard it kept him up at night. He had sleepless nights. This is true of the believer and of the minister.

I could stand here this morning and tell you how hard I work. I could hand you a time sheet that tells you all of the hours of the week that I work, but I don't need to, because I know you have full-time jobs or you're a full-time home keeper or you're a full-time student and you do ministry on top of your full-time job. You labor hard. It costs you sleep, not just for time's sake, but as you minister to others and as you pray for others and as you have concern for others, it keeps you up at night.

Paul says he went hungry. This is not some kind of a fast. This is Paul saying, "I had to skip meals. Sometimes I couldn't afford dinner. Sometimes I worked through lunch. It's just something that came to me as a part of the gospel ministry." We should not be surprised if the gospel ministry comes at a cost to us.

What does your life look like? You may not have the troubles Paul had, but do you do gospel ministry for the sake of others? Are you willing to be inconvenienced, even hurt, so you can be a blessing to others? It's like a parent with children. We are inconvenienced, we are harmed, we are hurt, we are shortchanged, that our children might benefit. So it is with the believer and those he is ministering to. As Christians, we are called to serve others.

Now how can you do that? How was Paul able to bear under all of these trials? How could Paul keep from putting obstacles in the way of the gospel? How was Paul able to live a life that commended his ministry? The answer is found in verses 6-7.

The first key is found in the middle of verse 6: the *Holy Spirit*. This should not surprise us. When Paul lists the graces that commend his ministry, they are fruits of the Spirit. We find that in Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians, chapter 5. There can be no love, no patience, no kindness, no knowledge, no purity without the work of the Spirit. This should be a great encouragement to you.

Don't say to me, "Pastor, after all, I'm not Paul. I can't have those kinds of graces. I minister to other people, but I'm no apostle. I can't handle this." My answer would be, "No, you are not Paul, but you have the same Holy Spirit that Paul had." The Holy Spirit dwells in you and ministers to you in the same way he ministered to Paul. The Spirit of God dwells in every believer, even you. He gives gifts to every believer. He is the key to our gospel ministry.

The second key is that Paul did not do this ministry in his own strength. Paul talks then about the *power of God*. What does he mean here? How is the power of God different from the Holy Spirit? I think he's speaking about the power of God you experienced when you heard and believed the gospel. What God has done for you, you can tell others about. One commentator puts it this way: power experienced becomes power communicated. This is not us telling others how great we are and that they should be like us. It is how great God has been to us and how he can be great to them also.

Lastly, Paul relied on the *weapons* God provided rather than on his own skills. He uses an interesting phrase at the end of verse 7: "...the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left." This is reminiscent of Paul's discussion of the whole armor of God in Ephesians, chapter 6. There Paul says, "The whole armor." He takes the word for *armor* or *weapon* and puts the adverb *whole* on top of it to make a word *whole armor*.

Here he just uses part of that word, the word for *armor* or *weapons*, but the idea is the same, because these weapons of righteousness come to us from God, his righteousness to us, and we have them on the right and on the left. When you think of that, you think of a Roman soldier who carries in his right hand his sword for offense and in his left hand his shield for defense.

He has the whole weaponry of God. He's able to face challenges from every front. That is how you are able to meet the challenges of gospel ministry. Do you see that God has not left you alone, that he doesn't expect you to carry out his ministry in your own power and skill? The only way the gospel ministry goes forward is in the power of almighty God.

## **The Reaction**

The last thing we see is the reaction we can expect to the gospel ministry. Paul reminds us that if we are faithful, if we do not place obstacles in the way of the gospel, if we commend the gospel with our lives, there will be one of two reactions. There is the negative reaction of the world, and there is the positive reaction of the Lord's reality.

This is important, because if we expect affirmation from the world, we will be extremely disappointed, and if we forget the reality of what the Lord is doing, we will be discouraged. Paul writes about these reactions in a series of rapid-fire, single-word pairs. He introduces them at the beginning of verse 8. He says: "...through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise."

The idea is that the believer should not be dragged down by the world's opinion. This is true whether we are being slandered or whether we're being praised, whether we're being honored or whether we're being dishonored. What people think about us does not matter. The reality God has created in us is what matters. Now, that doesn't mean this is easy. Calvin puts it this way: "There is nothing harder for a man of character than to incur disgrace." Doesn't that sound right?

Have you ever been accused of doing something you know you haven't done and it's completely out of character for you? And to endure that? What a hardship. But Calvin also says, "It is a sign of a mind well established in virtue, not to be diverted from its purpose, whatever disgrace it may incur." The idea here is even though disgrace comes, we keep our eyes on the prize. We look to the goal.

Paul writes with the knowledge that the world has a low opinion of him and of the gospel ministry in general. He says, "They think we're deceivers, impostors, playing a role for gain." This is, again, why it's so important not to put obstacles in the way of the gospel. How much damage has been done by false teachers, televangelists and the like, those who say they are bringing the gospel but really are trying to line their pockets? It allows the world to feel righteous in rejecting the gospel.

Paul says, "They say we are unknown." They don't care about us at all. We have the words of life, yet they'd rather go flock to singers, actors, sports figures. He says, "They look at us as if we are dying, fading before the progress of the world." The death of Christianity has been predicted for centuries. The French philosopher Voltaire wrote hundreds of years ago, "A hundred years from my death the Bible will be a museum piece."

Now, if that were a tweet, I would say that did not age well over the last few hundred years. We've been told that Christianity would never take root in China. Its culture was too foreign to Christianity. Now there are between 80 million and 100 million Christians in China. We are told that science will disprove Christianity as false and useless, yet here we are.

Being a Christian involved in gospel ministry also means hardships. Paul said, "We are as punished." This, again, brings up the thoughts of imprisonment, being passed over for promotions, being mocked before others. "We are viewed as being sorrowful." That's true in a very real sense. As we see others around us reject the Lord Jesus Christ, as we see them live lives that are damaging to themselves and others, we sorrow.

Paul says, "We're seen as being poor and having nothing." As far as the world goes, we are wasting our time. We are giving away things we should not, we should keep to ourselves. But what you and I need to do is listen to the second set of pairs that describe the reality of the Lord. Some may think we are impostors, but the Lord knows we are true. We may be unknown to media moguls and the world at large, but we are well known to God. We are recognized by him. He knows who we are.

We are indeed dying every day, but behold, Paul says, we live. This is a reminder of Jesus' words. "He who would save his life must lose it." Are you looking today to the Lord and the hope of eternal life for your hope? "We are always rejoicing," Paul says, in the sense that this is a settled state of mind for the believer. In spite of circumstances, the believer always has the opportunity to rejoice in the Lord. Finally, although we are seen as being poor, having nothing, it's true that in Jesus Christ we have all the riches of heaven. We possess everything, Paul says.

This is what the gospel ministry looks like. It is filled with trials and difficulties, hardships and pain, but it is the path marked out for you by Jesus Christ. He will equip you by his power. He is the true judge of your value and worth. Are you doing everything you can to serve him? Does your life not only prevent obstacles to but even commend the gospel to others? Follow the Lord Jesus Christ and be his messenger to others.