

Missions without Obstacles

2 Cor. 5:20-6:13 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.² For he says,

*“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”*

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.³ We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities,⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love;⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed;¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

– 2 Cor. 5:20 – 6:13, ESV

Introduction: Thrice Converted?

My coffee conversion came during my sophomore year of college. I was attending a morning work-out 2-3 days per week at 6:00 a.m., and I then had my first morning class at 9:00. I found that by the time I finished my workout, ate breakfast, headed back to my dorm, showered and dressed, I had about an hour before class. I was usually super tired during this time, and I made the mistake of lying down a couple of times. I missed my 9:00 class, even when I set an alarm. I knew I needed to stay awake during that hour. That's when I got a coffeemaker at a yard sale and started making coffee in my dorm room. I was converted.

Have you been converted? I'm not talking about coffee now. Have you been converted? You might respond either “yes” or perhaps “Converted to what?” In his 2012 book, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, Jonathan Dodson describes a three-fold conversion in the life of believers. First, we are converted to Christ and then we are converted to the church and then we are converted to mission, or to reaching the world. First, God turns us from self-reliance to faith in Christ for salvation. Then, God shows us our need for fellowship and community in the body of Christ and we become deeply committed to the church fellowship. Finally, God converts us from a church-community-only orientation to an engagement with the world in mission.

At each “conversion,” there can be both catalysts and obstacles. The catalysts are those things which God uses to prompt or facilitate our conversion, drawing us to Christ, to the church and to mission. The obstacles are those things which block us, which hinder our conversion.

In this passage, we see the Apostle Paul as an ambassador for Christ expressing his desire to be used by God as a catalyst for conversion and not to put any obstacles in anyone's path. As Paul expands on what he means by this in verses 3-13, we see his heart and we also see the heart of what it means to live on mission as Gospel ambassadors.

A. The Foundation for Missions, 5:20-6:2

Paul begins this section of 2 Corinthians by establishing the basis for his call as an ambassador of Christ:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.² For he says,

*“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”*

Paul says two very surprising things in these verses, which form the essence of what it means to be an ambassador for Christ:

1. **God makes his appeal through the Apostle Paul.** Now, the ESV is missing a translation for the little Greek adverb, *hos*, which means “as though” or “even as.” So, a more literal translation would read “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God is appealing through us.” To be an ambassador in the full sense of the term is to speak on behalf of another, as though that person were speaking through you. In this sense, which Paul has fully in view, being “ambassadors for Christ” is profoundly humbling and challenging.
2. **“Working together with him, then, we appeal to you.”** Here Paul uses the Greek verb *synergeo*, from which we get the word “synergy.” Paul’s ministry is a synergy with God, a working-together with God, so that when Paul makes his appeal, it is not Paul alone who is appealing. Nor does he simply represent Christ, but God is actually working together with Paul in the appeal. Thus Paul’s appeal is, in a very real sense, God’s appeal.

As an ambassador for Christ, what is Paul’s appeal? It consists of two main messages:

1. *We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*
2. *We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.*

The first appeal is Paul’s general appeal, directed toward unbelievers and, also, as here, to those within the church. We are naturally alienated from God, and the appeal of the Gospel is an appeal to be reconciled to God. The Gospel is thus the Gospel, or good news, of reconciliation, extending a way to be reconciled to God. The second appeal is a follow-up appeal, specifically for professing believers within the church, who have professed to have received the grace of God in the Gospel of reconciliation. This appeal is to not have received such grace in vain, or in other words, to prove to be making a false profession of being reconciled to God.

In between the two appeals, Paul gives the basis for the reconciling grace of God. How is it that we can be reconciled to God by His grace? What makes such reconciling grace possible?

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. – v. 21

This actually helps us to understand what it means to receive the grace of God in vain. The grace of being reconciled to God was purchased by Christ on the cross. We are reconciled to God only because God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. We receive the grace of God in vain if, after having made a profession of faith in Christ, we seek to be reconciled to God in any other way than through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Thus, we see that being an ambassador for Christ is a mission of reconciliation grounded in and centered on the cross. While the Law is useful for showing people their need for reconciliation, the grace of reconciliation comes from the cross. To be reconciled to God, we need our sins forgiven and we need perfect righteousness, and these come only from Christ's substitution for us on the cross.

B. The Call to Missions, vv. 3-10

As an ambassador for Christ and a minister of reconciliation, Paul wants to make sure he puts no obstacle in anyone's way. In other words, he wants to make sure He doesn't do anything to keep people from being reconciled to God through the cross. Paul told the Corinthians in I Corinthians that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. He said that the cross is a stumbling block for both Jews and Greeks. He is not interested in diminishing the foolishness or the stumbling block of the cross, but he does want to make sure he doesn't add his own obstacles, keeping people from the cross.

And so he says:

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

When Paul says, "we commend ourselves," he's speaking as an ambassador, and he means that he does everything he can to commend his God-given, God-empowered Gospel mission of reconciliation. He then unpacks four ways in which he commends his ministry as a servant of God and thus puts no obstacle in anyone's way:

I. Endurance, vv. 4-5

The first way Paul removes potential personal obstacles is by enduring hardship with joyful, patient faith: "by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger."

Paul does not pretend that being a faithful Christian will mean a life of ease. Being reconciled to God does not whisk us into some paradise state of ease. Paul repeatedly faced riotous mobs, unjust persecution, beatings, difficulties and more. Paul will later unpack these sufferings he has had to endure in chapter 11:24-29

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

Paul's life and ministry and message are miles away from a happy, sappy Christianity of peace and prosperity, of health and wealth. But that doesn't mean his life was constantly miserable. In Philippians 4:11-13, Paul writes:

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul showed the power of God's grace through his endurance in trials and suffering. This was one way he commended the message of the Gospel and put no obstacle in anyone's way.

2. Character, v. 6

The second way Paul put no obstacle in anyone's way was by demonstrating the character the Holy Spirit was working in Him: "by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love" This is not a legalistic self-righteousness but a description of genuine godly character:

- "purity" describes the sincerity of Paul's devotion to Christ.
- "knowledge" describes his knowledge of Christ and the Gospel, knowing God and His salvation through Jesus Christ.
- "Patience, kindness and genuine love" are all fruit of the Spirit, worked in Paul as the application of the righteousness of Christ by the Holy Spirit.
- "The Holy Spirit" is listed here in the list of six character qualities but is actually the source of the other five characteristics.

Paul leads with "purity" and ends with "love genuine" because he's emphasizing these two qualities. False "super-apostles" had moved into Corinth and were challenging the legitimacy of Paul's ministry, so Paul is emphasizing first his sincere devotion to Christ and secondly his genuine love for the Corinthians.

3. Conduct, v. 7

The third way Paul highlights to demonstrate how he puts no obstacle in anyone's way is in his conduct in the ministry: "by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left."

Paul's conduct on mission as an ambassador for Christ is marked by four things:

Truthful speech: Ambassadors must be faithful in their message, and so Paul is careful to speak the truth as God has given it, not to spin it or to adulterate it.

The Power of God: Paul's ministry also came with a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit to convert. If we preach the Gospel faithfully, we are trusting God to convert, because the Gospel is the power of God for salvation, as Paul says in Romans 1:16. But if we rely on our powers of persuasion and act more like salespeople than ambassadors, we are demonstrating the power of God but our own powers of persuasion.

Weapons of righteousness for the right hand: This is the hand that hold the sword, the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. Paul's proclamation was Scriptural, as he held forth the word of God.

And for the left: The left hand holds the shield for defense – in this case the shield of faith. Paul's trust for His defense is in God alone.

4. Reception, v. 8

Paul then moves from describing his conduct on mission as an ambassador to describing the reception the Gospel received, which is further evidence of the genuineness of his ministry. Here Paul begins a series of paradoxes – things which are seemingly contradictory according to the definitions of the world, but which are actually true and which demonstrate the power of God at work through the Gospel:

through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;

How was Paul's Gospel ministry received? Well, some people honored Him and honored the Gospel of reconciliation, but others dishonored him and his message. Some were slandering the Gospel and Christ's ambassador while others praised God and thanked Paul. Many Jewish leaders accused Paul of being an imposter, of not really being a Jewish scholar in the Pharisee tradition, educated at the feet of the great Gamaliel. But even though he was accused of being an imposter by many of his opponents, he knew he was true.

The message of the Gospel brings division, and so Paul's reception – being honored and dishonored, being slandered and praised, being judged an imposter and yet being true – this was evidence that the message he was proclaiming was indeed the genuine Gospel.

5. Results, vv. 9-10

And finally, the results of the Gospel in the lives of those who received Paul's Gospel ministry and in Paul's own life showed the genuineness of his ambassador mission. Here Paul continues his paradoxes: "*as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.*"

Paul was not a celebrity pastor. He was a nobody in the eyes of the world, and yet he was well known to God as a faithful servant.

In 1 Corinthians 15:31, Paul had said "I die every day." The Gospel requires that we die to our selfish agendas and desires; Gospel ambassadorship especially requires that all selfish ambition die daily. Yet through the Gospel, as we die to ourselves, we live to God!

Paul endured much punishment, sometimes as loving chastisement from his heavenly Father, and yet God would never abandon or cut off Paul from eternal life.

Paul had much sorrow, and yet he was always rejoicing and could always rejoice in Christ.

Paul had nothing, and repeatedly had to let go of earthly wealth and prestige, and yet he had everything he needed in Christ.

These paradoxes that Paul lays out for us in verses 8-10 can only be true in the Gospel because of the reconciliation that Christ accomplished on the cross. In Christ, we have an identity and a security that the world cannot touch. In Christ, we have an inheritance and a redemption and an adoption that the world may mock and scorn but they can never take away.

And that is how we can truly be . . .

- ✓ honored even while we are dishonored,
- ✓ praised even while we are slandered,
- ✓ treated as imposters and yet be true,
- ✓ be unknown to the world and yet known to God,
- ✓ be dying to this world and to ourselves yet alive in Christ to God forever,
- ✓ punished by the world and even disciplined by our Father and yet never killed,
- ✓ sorrowful over our sin and over the world's rejection of Christ and yet rejoicing in our forgiveness and rejoicing in His unshakable kingdom,
- ✓ poor in the eyes of the world and yet making so many rich through the Gospel,
- ✓ having nothing this world considers valuable and yet possessing everything in Christ.

Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ gives us this powerful position and this life-changing perspective, and it is only as we live out a truly Gospel-saturated mindset that we remove all obstacles and become catalysts for conversion instead of hindrances. Our natural human tendency is to want to resolve the tension in these paradoxes by getting rid of the unpleasant element. We don't want to be unknown, so we seek fame. We don't want to have nothing and to be poor, and so we seek wealth. We don't want to be sorrowful, so we seek to escape hardship and sorrow. But when we do this, we mislead people about the nature of Christ and the Christian life. We put stumbling blocks in people's way, keeping them from truly seeing and coming to Christ.

C. The Partnership of Missions, vv. 11-13

But Paul isn't finished yet. By the grace of God, he has not put any obstacle in anyone's way, through his endurance in every trial, through his character and his conduct in Christ, through his paradoxical embrace of God's will in the reception and results of his ministry of reconciliation. Yet while Paul has not out any obstacle

in anyone's way, an obstacle remains still. It is because Paul's openness and love for the Corinthians has not been reciprocated:

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

Paul says his speech has been open and his heart has been open, too. Nothing in Paul's message to the Corinthians or in his affection for the Corinthians has been in any way restricted or closed off. Yet the Corinthians are not returning the same affection. The partnership is one-way.

Partnership is fellowship and it is a two-way open-hearted relationship. Gospel ministry requires open mouths to speak the truth and open hearts to do so in sincere love and deep affection. This removes obstacles and this glorifies Christ, but double-tongued, insincere speech and closed affections do not.

Perfection vs. Faithfulness

If we really take what Paul says in this passage serious, it can be overwhelming. We are called to be ambassadors for Christ, just as God is making His appeal through us. We are called to work together with God in reconciling people to Himself through the Gospel. To do this well and to remove obstacles, we must endure suffering well, we must bear the fruit of the Spirit well, we must engage in ministry of the word and prayer well, we must receive rejection from the world as approval from God and rejoice in the midst of suffering.

Who is equal to such a task? Is Paul calling for a kind of perfectionism that is unattainable in this life? Perfectionism? No. But Paul is calling us to something that is unattainable on our own. Paul is living out a ministry faithfulness that is beyond human ability. Fruitful Gospel missions doesn't require perfectionism, which is usually fake and insincere and stressful and self-centered. It does require faithfulness, a faithfulness that is beyond our ability but which Christ has accomplished and which Christ will live in us through the Holy Spirit.

Is fruitful, faithful Gospel ministry beyond our ability? Absolutely. It is so far beyond our ability that Christ must do it in us and through us. The good news is that He does, if we will not receive the grace of God in vain by trying to add our human efforts to the finished work of the cross. When Jesus said, "It is finished," He meant it. And He who has begun a good work in us will be faithful to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. Let's abide in Him and let His word abide in us, and then we will bear much fruit.