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 2 Corinthians 6:1-13  
 Tenth Message  
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## APPEALS FROM A SUFFERING SERVANT

We have reached the final study in our current series on the new covenant. I have enjoyed being immersed in this text once again. It has been several years since I taught it and I have been refreshed and renewed by the truths that were instrumental in my spiritual growth when I first came to PBC. I am reminded again how foundational this material is to our life in Christ, both as individuals and as a church body. And I enjoyed having Jerry Tu and Larry Brown contribute to this series. They both did an excellent job with the text and spoke from their hearts. One of our core values at PBC is equipping and training new teachers and leaders, giving people an opportunity to use their spiritual gifts. This is how the church is designed to function, with each member employing the gift that God has given for the building up of the church. This is what we want to model here.

The Corinthians had become distracted and sidetracked by opponents who sought to discredit Paul and his ministry. The apostle had deep concerns for and painful tensions with these believers. But he never gave up on them. As a result of receiving good news of a renewed relationship, Paul gives a detailed perspective of his apostolic ministry so that the Corinthians could see the difference between him and his opponents. They could boast in him and have an answer for those who took pride in appearance and not in heart.

Paul begins to bring this section of the letter to a close by making some personal appeals and exhortations. (The actual conclusion to this section comes in 7:4, but we will end our study this morning in 6:13.) Now that he has laid out his perspective on his ministry, how will he exhort the church, and why should they believe and follow him? The text is made up of two appeals, separated by a detailed explanation of Paul's example that both validates his ministry and gives his words credibility. The first appeal focuses on a response to God.

### I. Paul's First Appeal: Be Reconciled to God

**And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—for He says, "AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU." Behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION"— (2 Cor 6:1-2)**

At this point in the letter Paul addresses the Corinthians directly, using the personal pronoun "you." In this first appeal he exhorts them to not receive the grace of God in vain. Essentially, this is synonymous with the exhortation we saw in our text last week, "be reconciled with God."

Paul bases his authority on being a co-worker with God in the ministry of reconciliation. He is an ambassador of Christ. God speaks to the Corinthians through Paul's mouth, as the apostle wrote in 5:20: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." The word "appeal" is the same word translated "urge" in 6:1.

The Corinthians had embraced Christ through Paul's ministry. They had received the gift of reconciliation by accepting the cross of Christ. But various opponents of Paul had influenced them. The apostle was urging them to be reconciled to God or else they would run the risk of receiving the grace of God, this free gift of reconciliation through the death of Jesus, in vain. "Vain" means to be empty, unfruitful, to no profit. To receive the grace of God in vain means to derive no profit from it, to not enjoy the benefit for which it was intended. In light of what Paul had just said in chapter 5, this means to not live as a new creation in Christ but rather to live in the old creation. It means to not enjoy a reconciled relationship with God based on the cross but to live under law as the basis of that relationship. It means to not know fully the love of Christ revealed through his death. It means to not be set free from a selfish and sinful lifestyle. It means to not appropriate what we believe to be true in Christ.

I have always had a difficult time receiving gifts. I think they cost too much or that I do not deserve them. I recall one Christmas several years ago when my wife gave me a present but I put it on a shelf in my closet for several months. I had received the gift in vain because I did not put it to use. This is what Paul is talking about.

Last week, I used an illustration about having a deficit bank account, a large negative balance that we had no way of changing. Then the bank president offered to exchange our negative account for his son's very positive and unlimited account. We were very happy to take his offer. But to receive the grace of God in vain is to never draw on our new account, to live as if we had never received the gift and still had the old account.

Now Paul amplifies and intensifies his appeal, quoting from Isaiah 49:8. Not only is Paul a co-worker with God, he also views himself as an OT prophet, speaking with the same authority: "thus says the Lord." The subject of Isaiah 40-55 is the restoration of Israel and the inauguration of a new creation. God's people are reconciled to God through a "ransom" of people in "exchange" for Israel (43:3-4), and God "blotting out the sins of his people" (43:22-28). This was the day of salvation to which Israel had looked for many years. (Isaiah 49:8-13 contains the words "salvation" and "covenant.")

Paul is saying that this day has begun in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The new order has arrived through the new covenant. The new creation is now here, and through the Spirit, God's people can live in the age to come. God has heard and God has helped. Paul seeks the Corinthians' attention by repeating Isaiah's words and adding "behold, behold." He urges them to respond "now." Today is the day. Do not delay any longer. Following the super apostles and peddlers means living in the old covenant and the old creation when the door to eternal life and eternal living is wide open. Now is right time. Don't receive the grace of God in vain.

As believers in Jesus Christ we face a great danger, and that is to believe in Christ but to live in the old when the new has arrived. Many things distract us and cause us to receive God's grace in vain.

Perhaps we get confused due to some false or erroneous teaching. Perhaps we have had a bad church experience or a believer has hurt us in some way. Perhaps we have grown spiritually apathetic. Maybe we are living in guilt or shame. Maybe things are not going too well for us and our focus is on our circumstances. Perhaps we are tormented by some sin that we just don't want to give up. Or maybe we really want God to fix our old creation. All of our efforts are going into what we want this life to be and we are trying to blackmail God into making it happen before we give ourselves fully to him.

Whatever might be holding you back, Paul's word rings clear. Today is the day of salvation. Now is the right time. No matter where you have been, no matter what has hampered you in the past, let go of the old today and enter into the new. Put the cross at the center of your life and be controlled by the love of Christ.

## II. Paul's Example to the Corinthians: A Servant

Why should the Corinthians respond to Paul's appeal? In verses 3-10, he switches from "you" to "we" and talks about what validates him and his ministry of the new covenant.

**giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things. (6:3-10)**

Here we see Paul's credentials and why the Corinthians should abandon the false and deceptive leaders and listen to him: he is a servant of God. The reference to Isaiah in verse 2 provides the key. Christ fulfilled the role of Isaiah's suffering servant. Paul sees himself as a suffering servant, following the example of "the" suffering servant.

Therefore, Paul is very diligent to not be a negative example. He does not want to give an occasion for offense to the ministry; he does not want to be a cause of stumbling. He uses a double negative for emphasis. He is "not like many, peddling the word of God" (2 Cor 2:17). He has "renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God" (2 Cor 4:2).

Paul's ministry was under attack by his opponents. They accused him of craftiness in money-related matters, vacillation in travel arrangements, lacking gifts in speaking, and being inadequate because of his suffering. The apostle defends his ministry so as to not be an obstacle to anyone being reconciled to God. He does not want the ministry to be discredited or blamed in any way.

Rather, what commends Paul is how he conducts himself in everything, in a wide range of circumstances, as a servant of God. "In everything" is a contrast to "in nothing." This important word "commend" occurs nine times as a verb and once as a noun in the letter. Paul asked in 2 Cor 3:1: "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?" He also said in chapter 5:12: "We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud

of us." It seems Paul was criticized for self-commendation, while his opponents commended themselves. While he did not want to commend himself through words, he does commend himself through his actions as a servant of God.

What follows is a list of 28 phrases describing Paul's example in various ways. I am going to give a detailed explanation of each phrase or word, but I would like to look at them briefly and highlight the four categories into which they fall. The first category is a list of hardships, all introduced by the preposition "in":

**in much endurance,  
in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses,  
in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults,  
in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, (6:5)**

The idea of much or great endurance is a general heading that applies to the nine hardships that follow and perhaps to the entire list. Following this first phrase, nine hardships are listed in three triads.

The first triad is the response of a world hostile to God. For example, the word "distresses" means a confined, restricted place from which there can be no escape.

The second triad contains concrete examples of suffering at the hands of others. Paul received the thirty-nine lashes on five occasions, the Roman beating with rods three times, and he spent time in jail. Acts records that riots broke out in nine cities in response to his ministry.

The third triad consists of difficulties of a more voluntary nature as a result of his ministry, such as making tents (often by night), and traveling without provision for food. Paul also gives a lengthy list of his hardships in chapter 11.

Paul's opponents pointed at his sufferings as a sign of weakness and an invalidation of his ministry, but Paul saw them as his badges of authenticity as a suffering servant following the example of Christ.

The second category highlights godly character and dependence on God's resources in the midst of hardship. Eight phrases are introduced by the same preposition "in," as we saw in the first category. There are two sets of tetrads.

**in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness,  
in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the  
power of God; (6:6-7)**

Purity conveys integrity and sincerity. Knowledge is probably connected to the knowledge of God disseminated through the gospel. Patience and kindness are fruits of the Spirit, evidence of the new creation. Patience is reactive; kindness is proactive.

The second tetrad is framed by the Holy Spirit and the power of God. The Spirit supplies the power of God in our weakness and the resources for godly character. Enclosed within the two outer phrases we find love and truth. Genuine love is not hypocritical or literally, "unmasked." The word of truth is connected to the gospel, implying that when Paul speaks, he speaks gospel words. Paul acts in love and speaks God's truth. Love and truth are a winning combination.

The third category contains three phrases introduced by the Greek preposition "by" or "through." We might think of these phrases as the how and where Paul persists or endures.

**by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left,  
by glory and dishonor,  
by evil report and good report; (6:8)**

The first phrase is a military metaphor: weapons for the right and left hand, i.e., weapons for offense and defense, referring to the sword and the shield. The idea is that Paul is well equipped by God to act in ethical righteousness in his battles for the God's kingdom. He endures by living righteously. Perhaps this is a Janus phrase, looking backward to the Holy Spirit and its fruit, as well as forward. The second and third phrases describe how Paul is received. Sometimes he is honored and people have a good opinion of him; other times he is dishonored and slandered. Paul acts in a godly way, with God's resources, no matter the response to his ministry.

The fourth category lists seven antitheses. The first element is introduced by "as" and the second by "yet." These phrases contrast the appearance or perception with the reality.

**regarded as deceivers and yet true;**  
**as unknown yet well-known,**  
**as dying yet behold, we live;**  
**as punished yet not put to death,**  
**as sorrowful yet always rejoicing,**  
**as poor yet making many rich,**  
**as having nothing yet possessing all things. (6:9-10)**

Paul might be viewed as a deceiver, but he knows that he is true before God. Humans might not know Paul, but God does. He might appear as dying but he has resurrection life. He is chastised or disciplined by the Lord through his trials, but God's power and mercy are ever present. The hardships he encountered caused him grief, but he rejoiced always. He might have been poor physically but he was rich spiritually and he lived to make others rich. He might have been viewed as not having anything and yet he had everything he needed and wanted in Christ.

What commended Paul's ministry was the way in which he acted as a slave of Christ (4:5) and a servant of God. He was a man of integrity and godliness in the midst of physical and emotional suffering. His example gives us pause to reflect and evaluate on our own willingness to be servants and live for others.

A servant encounters all kinds of unpleasant and uncomfortable circumstances, but he endures them willingly for the sake of others. A servant remains faithful and obedient to God, despite what life throws at him. A servant learns to depend on God's resources, not his own. A servant is persistent and consistent through good and bad times. He takes the high road and remains above it all, not resorting to complaining, manipulation or resentment. Even when he is wrongly perceived he trusts in what he knows to be true. Despite what others think of him he believes in himself and in God.

When I read these verses, I am reminded of the poem "If," by Rudyard Kipling, which I memorized in high school.

If you can keep your head when all about you  
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
 If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
 But make allowance for their doubting too;  
 If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
 Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
 Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
 And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
 If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;  
 If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
 And treat those two impostors just the same;

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
 Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
 Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
 And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
 And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
 And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
 And never breathe a word about your loss;  
 If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
 Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'  
 If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
 Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,  
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
 If all men count with you, but none too much;  
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
 And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

If Kipling had mentioned the power of God, his list would have closely matched Paul's. This poem has been a powerful influence in my life. When circumstances have battered me and brought me to my knees, I recall these words. As I lie on my bed unable to sleep, I am reminded of what it means to be a man and a servant of God.

What commends the new covenant ministry? What gives our life credibility? Certainly it is not success, power, fame or fortune. What gives our life credibility, what validates the truth of Jesus Christ is being a servant of God in the midst of all the things that this life and this world throw at you. What makes you a man or a woman as God designed is the ability to be a person of integrity and character in every circumstance and being willing to lay down your life for others, whether you are a husband, a wife, an engineer, a friend or a Sunday school teacher. If you want to have influence and significance, simply become a suffering servant in the mold of Jesus and Paul. That is our calling.

### III. Paul's Second Appeal: Be Reconciled to Us

Paul now makes a second appeal, beginning in verse 11:

**Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also. (6:11-13)**

The first appeal is to be reconciled to God; the second is to be reconciled to Paul. To be reconciled to God means to be reconciled to Paul and vice versa. We can't open our hearts to God and at the same time close them off to others. Here Paul brings to a climax this section of the letter as he addresses the Corinthians by name, something he rarely does. He has been open and vulnerable to the Corinthians. He has opened his mouth and shared with them everything he knows. His heart is also wide open or enlarged. He has embraced them fully with his whole being.

Paul's assessment of the Corinthians is honest and brief. The problem isn't with him but with them. Their affections have been restrained. They have constricted and withheld their hearts and feelings towards the apostle. But in rejecting him they have rejected his person. He says they are choking, stifling their own lives, their

involvement with others and God. They are robbing themselves of the joy that God wants them to have.

So Paul appeals to them as a father to open their hearts to him. He is calling them to reciprocate, to open their hearts and embrace him fully, to embrace him as he has embraced them. He is a father and they are his children. As he stated in 3:2, the Corinthians are a letter written in his heart, and he wants to be in their hearts too.

The Corinthians had been fickle and disloyal in their relationship with Paul and caused him grief, yet his love for them never changed. He never gave up on them. He does not respond to them in kind, but rather demonstrates both a father's love and a pastor's heart. He continues to move toward his children as a loving parent.

We have the same problem as the Corinthians. We are inclined to hold back and close ourselves off to others. We do this because of fear, shame, guilt, self-preservation, resentments, shyness, jealousy, mistrust, past hurt and awkwardness. It is very difficult for us to totally let go and give ourselves to others. It is hard to be vulnerable and to trust. But often it isn't someone else's problem but our own. We are restricting ourselves. And in the end we are only hurting ourselves.

Here is how Frederick Buechner put it: "The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own."<sup>1</sup>

To be a parent means to be hurt by your children. To love others means that at some point others might cause you pain and grief. But that is our calling: to open up our hearts, to allow others to enter into our lives, and to continue to move towards them with both love and truth. The new covenant means that we no longer live for ourselves.

Paul tells the Corinthians to be reconciled to God and be reconciled with him. The two are inseparable. We would do well to consider these words for our own lives. The church body is a strange place. All kinds of things happen because we are frail, weak and sinful. But this is the place where our relationship with God gets worked out. We can't love God without loving and forgiving people, despite the pain and uneasiness that this causes us. We too, like Paul, have to become suffering servants.

What might God be asking you to do? Here is the bottom line. No matter what has happened in the past to you or by you, do the right thing today. Today is the right time. Today is the day of salvation. Leave the old things behind and live in the new creation. Each and every day we get up and make a choice to do the right thing.

Here is how Paul ends this letter:

**Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. (2 Cor 13:11)**

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)*

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 46.