

ENGAGE

- Paul closes his appeal to the Corinthians regarding his defense of his ministry.
- He deals with the cost of doing ministry for others. It calls for true and right behavior for those who serve the Lord.
- It calls for endurance through every form of trial and persecution.
- Strive to discuss and meditate on our strength of faith and endurance as we face trials in our lives.

EXAMINE

approving - The word is the same as is translated 'commend' in 2 Corinthians 3:1, and there is an obvious reference here to v. 1-3 of that chapter.

as the ministers of God - There is an ambiguity in the A. V. here. The Apostle means 'we, as ministers of God, recommend ourselves to those to whom we minister' in the way afterwards mentioned, not that the Apostles prove themselves to be ministers of God by their conduct. Tyndale renders let us behave ourselves as the ministers of God.

in much patience - Dean Stanley divides the means by which the Apostle commended himself into four classes:

- (1) from patience (or rather endurance) to 'fastings,' referring to the bodily sufferings of the Apostle;
- (2) from 'pureness' to 'love unfeigned,' referring to the virtues, that is, the manifestations of the Divine presence in St Paul;
- (3) from 'by the word of truth' to 'by evil report and good report,' referring to the means whereby he was enabled to prove himself to be a true minister of God; and
- (4) the remainder, relating to the acceptation in which the Apostles were held, and its contrast with the reality. Bengel also would subdivide the first class into three triplets of sufferings. But this is perhaps somewhat fanciful.

in afflictions - The word thus rendered is translated indifferently by tribulations (Wiclif so renders it here) and afflictions in the A. V. See note on 2 Corinthians 4:8.

Paul longs for the Corinthians' faith not to be meaningless: "We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain" (6:1b).

For the believers to pose any challenge to the apostle's teaching, though, is enough to make Paul wonder whether their faith is indeed empty.

Sources

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Accepting God's Grace in Vain

The phrase "in vain" is a phrase that Paul has employed elsewhere, particularly in connection with his own ministry (e.g., *eis kenon* Galatians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:1; 3:5). The term *kenos* means "empty." In 1 Thessalonians Paul writes that his own ministry has not been "in vain." What are the markers to determine whether his ministry is fruitful? A brief case study of two churches illuminates Paul's concerns in 2 Corinthians 6.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul correlates the potential success of his ministry -- a ministry that has faced persecution and hardship -- to signs of the church's faithfulness. In 1 Thessalonians 3:5, the apostle writes that he sent Timothy "that I might know your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor would be in vain." Timothy's good news of the Thessalonians' faithfulness affirms for Paul that his work had not been "in vain."

Based on 1 Thessalonians, the faithfulness of the church to live out the gospel is a sign of the fruitfulness of Paul's ministry. Paul claims that his ministry -- with all its hardships -- is not empty or pointless because the Thessalonians have accepted the gospel as the word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13) and have imitated Paul even by their willingness to suffer on account of their faith (1 Thessalonians 2:14; 3:1-8).

The Thessalonian church serves as an interesting contrast to the church at Corinth. In contrast to the good news of the Thessalonians' loyalty, Paul begs the Corinthians "not to accept the grace of God in vain." Paul is certain that his ministry at Corinth has illustrated the gospel that he has preached. He confidently says in 1 Corinthians 15:10 that God's grace toward him has not been in vain because Paul has allowed God's grace to work through him to fuel his ministry. The Corinthians, however, have not provided the same signs of faithfulness as Paul or as the believers at Thessalonica. Instead, there is evidence of tension in Paul's relationship with the Corinthians.

Until this point in 2 Corinthians 6, there is plenty of evidence that the relationship between Paul and this beloved community has been strained. The opening of this letter (2 Corinthians 2:15-16) indicates a change in travel plans from what was expressed in 1 Corinthians 16:5-9. Furthermore, the apostle has made a painful visit (2:1-4) and written a tearful letter (2 Corinthians 7:8).

It is also evident that Paul does not separate his own apostolic role from the message that he preaches. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul commends himself and his co-workers as servants of God. The tone here is not as sharp as the tone of 2 Corinthians 10:1-13:14, where Paul is defending his apostleship against the so-called "super-apostles" (11:5). Indeed, the change of tone suggests that something happened between the writing of 2 Corinthians 6:1-13 and chapters 10-13 to cause the tension to escalate. In 2 Corinthians 6, though, Paul urges the believers to open their hearts to one another and to Paul as a sign of their faith.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that Paul has expressed concern about the potential emptiness of the Corinthians' faith. In his previous correspondence, Paul says that his preaching and their faith are "empty" if

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Christ has not been raised (1 Corinthians 15:14). If there is no resurrection, as Paul accuses some in the church of proclaiming (1 Corinthians 15:12), then their faith is meaningless.

What would it mean for the Corinthians to accept God's grace in vain? Should they carry on without loving one another and without trusting Paul and his gospel, then in Paul's reasoning they are not demonstrating the power of God's transforming grace. Should they continue to live in tension with one another and with their beloved leader, then they are not bearing witness to new creation wrought by God's Spirit. Should they continue on their current path, they will have shown by their lack of love that they have accepted God's grace in vain.

Now is the Day of Salvation

Now is the time for the Corinthians to show by their actions that they have not accepted the grace of God in vain. Paul emphasizes that the day of salvation is now. To enforce this urgency, Paul employs a quote from Isaiah 49 that he interprets as finding fulfillment in the present time. Today is the day for the Corinthians to demonstrate their faithfulness by opening their hearts to Paul and to one another (6:13; 7:2). The Corinthians, after all, are God's new creation (5:17). Their actions should reflect God's gracious acts in their lives.

Open Wide Your Hearts

In 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, Paul urges the church to open their hearts. Based on evidence in Paul's correspondence, the whole Corinthian church has not always been supportive of Paul nor has this church been able to get along well with one another. According to 1 Corinthians, these believers have been divided over a number of issues -- beliefs in the resurrection, lawsuits, arguments over the supremacy of spiritual gifts, divisions over leadership, disagreements over worship, etc.... Paul reminds the church of the gospel in which they believed and urges the Corinthians to use that gospel to set the pattern for their behavior.

Hardships, Heartbreak, and Ministry

Paul's catalog of hardships demonstrates the trustworthiness of his character, the zeal of his apostolic mission, and the sincerity of his love for the Corinthian church. He has taken great risks to tell the Corinthians of God's grace and love. Yet, Paul never doubts that the gospel is worth it. Even while he accuses the Corinthians of being restricted in their affections toward him (6:12), he still loves them.

Like the Corinthians, churches today struggle to know how to live faithfully. Sometimes that struggle produces strain in the very relationships that are meant to help church members live faithfully. In 2 Corinthians 6, though, Paul puts those relationships in the proper perspective. For Paul, failing to love one another is a sign of accepting the grace of God "in vain." Now is the day of salvation. Now is the time to exhibit faithfulness, not simply through words, but through action. Now is the time to live as witnesses of God's new creation.

QUESTIONS

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- What kinds of things does Paul list in 6:4-5 as showing that he is a true servant of God?
- Why was Paul so careful not to give offense in anything? (3)
- List some of the physical sufferings which commended Paul as a minister of God (4-5)
- List those areas where Paul demonstrated his integrity as a minister of God (6-7)
- Paul lists pairs of opposites that show he is a true servant of God in 6:8. Different groups of people would describe him in completely different ways.
- How do such opposite statements both show his true status?
- What is keeping the Corinthians from truly accepting and appreciating Paul (6:11-13)?
- With what kind of people does Paul warn the Corinthians against getting entangled (6:14)?
- What amount of struggle cause us to stop behaving as ministers of God?
- What kind of relationship does God promise to those who are faithful to Him (6:18)?

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