

Servants of God

2Corinthians 6:1-13

It is hard to read the description the bible gives us of the early church and keep yourself from being a little bit envious.

Just listen to the description in **Acts 2:42-47**.

That sounds pretty good doesn't it?

These people clearly loved God and loved each other.

When we read passages like this we might think, "Man that church was perfect", but if you read a little further in the book of Acts you will find that is not the case.

Just like it is today the early church was made up of imperfect people.

One of the things that came up in the early days had to do with how the widows in the church were being looked after.

In Acts chapter six we are told that the Greek speaking Jews in the church were complaining against the Hebrew speaking Jews in the church for neglecting the Greek speaking widows in the daily distribution of food.

They bring the matter to the Apostles and they see it is a serious problem that needs to be dealt with.

They also recognize that their primary task in the church is to teach people the word of God and that they need to appoint others to look after to distribution of food.

They choose seven men of good reputation, who are full of the Spirit, and wisdom to "serve tables." The word serve there is a Greek word from which we get the word deacon.

Some suggest that these seven men are the first people appointed to the office of deacon in the early church.

That is a great title for the office because the word deacon simply means servant.

What the church needed to deal with the challenges it was facing is people who were willing to humble themselves and serve.

The same thing is still true today.

In fact, the idea of being a servant in the church applies to far more than people who hold the office of deacon.

The term servant can rightly be applied to every single Christian in the world.

Jesus made that clear to his disciples when they were fighting over who should be first among them, He said, "If you want to be first you need to make yourself last, the servant of all."

The word “servant” there again is the word ‘deacon’.

As Christians we are called to be servants, servants of all because we are servants of God.

[That is how the apostle Paul describes himself and his co-workers in our text this morning **2Corinthians 6:1-13**. These verses describe for us some of what it means to be servants of God. That is what we are as believers and so these verses have some important lessons for all of us. I want to point out three lessons for us in this text about being servants of God. Number one is this...]

Point #1 – God’s servants work at God’s work. (Verses 1-2)

Trusting in the absolute power of the LORD over everything ought to motivate His people to cooperate with His revealed will.

Verse 1 says something that is really important for us to hear.

At the end of chapter five the apostle speaks about God making people into new creations through faith in Jesus, how we as believers are called to be ambassadors for Jesus, and about what the LORD actually did at the cross so that we can be right with Him.

What God did is astounding.

Jesus, Who is God the Son, came into the world and took on humanity.

In His true humanity He was completely perfect in His thoughts, words, actions, and feelings.

That alone amazes me beyond words.

He then used that perfection to offer Himself to God as a sacrifice to pay for all of our evil deeds and failures (what we call sin).

God the Father on the cross poured out the just punishment for our evil deeds on to Jesus because He placed them upon His precious Son.

Jesus then endures the fullness of God’s wrath to the point of death so that it can be justly satisfied.

After that He is raised from the dead and is now in heaven living and reigning for the eternal good of everyone who belongs to Him.

When we trust in that by faith alone our sins are dealt with and Jesus’ perfection is placed on us and we are declared right with God.

That is God’s appeal to the world and Paul says here that those who make that appeal to the world are “working together with him (that is God).”

To understand this phrase properly we have to understand Who God is.

If we look at “working together with him” as God needs us or we are equal partners in this work, then we are way off.

God needs nothing outside Himself to do all that He pleases.

God's power is fully sufficient to do everything He desires and nothing that happens is ever outside of His knowledge or control.

Paul believed that strongly and teaches that clearly in a number of places.

Some people have taken that really good theology and concluded that God's power and control means we ought to do nothing in service of the God's appeal to the world.

That kind of thinking is impossible to square with verses like this.

The Bible sees God's control over absolutely everything as motivation to serve His revealed will instead of a reason to be complacent about it.

This is not a matter of seeing ourselves as necessary to God, which is heresy, it is a matter of working at what God is working at because what God is working at is glorious and good.

[Imagine for a moment an angel being given a task by God. Happens all the time in the Bible right? Happens a fair bit in the Christmas story in fact. Do you think an angel when commanded to do something says to God, "Do it yourself?" Do you think an angel sees himself as irreplaceable as though God's work won't get done without him? No, the angel hears the command of God, knows he has been created to do the commands of God, and delights in doing what he has been asked.]

Paul is saying the same thing about himself and his co-workers here.

Look at what that causes him to do. **(Verse 1-2)**

Receiving "the grace of God in vain" likely has the sense of saying you believe the gospel without that having any real effect upon your life.

You say you have trusted Jesus this morning. You say you have received His grace today.

How has it changed you?

Don't ignore that, he says, "now is the day of salvation".

You may not get a tomorrow, and the servant of God knows that and wants others to know that because that is the work of God in the world.

Christians are NOT benchwarmers.

It is true we all serve in different kinds of ways, but we are all called to serve.

[If you are sitting here this morning thinking, "God can do it without me!" You are 100% correct and He will do just that if need be, but if you are thinking that may I suggest to you that you are missing the point and perhaps there is something seriously wrong with your heart

because you don't want to work at God's work! Servants of God don't see themselves as necessary, but rather they see themselves as willing to be used by God in whatever manner He chooses. Here is a second lesson...]

Point #2 – God's servants help rather than hinder people coming to Christ. (Verses 3-10)

It is very easy to put obstacles in the way of people knowing Jesus as their Saviour, but as believers we need strive to do what we can to point people in the right direction.

We can see the apostle's thinking on hindering people in verse 3.

Some translations have 'offense' and some 'stumbling block' in place of the word 'obstacle'.

The idea is turning people off or putting something in their way in their coming to Jesus.

If the faithful communication of Who Jesus is and what He has accomplished on the cross is a "stumbling block" or "offence" there is nothing we can or should do about that.

In fact, in both Romans 9:33 and 1Peter 2:8, Jesus is described in very similar language as an offense and stumbling block to people.

In Romans 9:33 people stumble over Christ because they are trying to please God through works and refuse to accept that they cannot save themselves.

In 1Peter 2:8 it includes people who reject the message of the cross for any kind of reason.

The gospel is offensive to the unbeliever and it is an obstacle because of their own foolish and pride.

This verse here is talking about something different than the offense of Christ.

Notice Paul says, "**We** put no obstacle..." which means he and his fellows servants are in no way adding to the offense of the gospel.

If people stumble or are offended by Jesus that is ok, if we cause them to stumble or we add to the offense of the gospel that is not ok.

[The disciples did this when children were coming to Jesus. Remember? They rebuked them trying to keep them from coming to the Lord. What did Jesus say? He said, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them."]

If we say to people you can't come until you get a better haircut, get rid of your tattoos, get your life all cleaned up, or meet any standard of our own making before they can come to Christ we are putting obstacles in their way.

If we are selfish, unforgiving, condemning, self-righteous jerks then we are putting obstacles in their way.

If we do that God will “find fault with our ministry (service) and that is obviously a bad thing.

Instead Paul says this in **verse 4a**.

This is a completely different kind of commending than the kind he said he was not doing in chapter five verse 12.

In that context he was referring to talking himself up, making himself look good in the eyes of people.

Here he is talking about servants of God using their lives as billboard signs pointing people to the goodness of Christ.

He says, he and his coworkers are doing that in every way and then in **verses 4b-10** he tells us what he means by that.

There is a great deal in those verses worthy of our reflection, I want to highlight a few.

These verses divide into three majors sections. Verses 4b-5 summarize endurance through difficulties.

Some general, some inflicted by others, and some being part of working hard for the LORD.

Enduring difficulties well is a means of pointing people to Jesus.

Verses 6-7 speak about the pursuit of growing in godliness.

It is important to see that he mentions “the Holy Spirit” (verse 6) right in the middle of the list.

Growing in these things point people to Jesus because they happen by the power of the Holy Spirit working in the servants of God.

Verse 7 gives us the sense that this process is one of warfare when he speaks of “the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left.”

“What are those weapons?”

Paul doesn’t explicitly state what they are here, but I agree with commentators who suggest he is likely using the picture of the conventional weapons of the time period.

Since most people are right handed, most soldiers would put a sword in their right hand and a shield in their left.

That fits quite nicely with Paul’s description of the “armor of God” in Ephesians 6.

The sword of the Spirit is the word of God and the shield is the shield of faith.

If we are going to fight to grow in holiness we need God’s Word and we need to believe it.

Thirdly in verses 8-10 the apostle gives us a series of opposites.

There are at least two things for us to take away from the list.

First, no matter what our situation is we have opportunity to point people to Jesus.

If people honour us or dishonour we can honour Christ.

Whether people are praising or slandering us we can praise Jesus.

People may call us liars, we need to be committed to the truth.

Another thing that stands out here is God's perspective versus man's perspective.

People may not know us but God does.

We may appear to be on the verge of dying, but we are alive in Christ.

While there is much grief in the world the believer has reason for joy.

We may lose every earthly possession but always have the treasure of eternal life to offer to as many as will receive it.

When the servant of God has his/her sights set on Jesus as their treasure it points others to Him.

[It is sort of like being a road sign. If we are putting unnecessary obstacles in front of people we are like a "Road Closed" sign. If we are serving the LORD well then we are like a sign saying "Get off the road to destruction and go to the cross!" If we are people working at God's work, then it makes sense we would want to help rather than hinder people coming to Jesus. That brings us to one more lesson about being a servant of God. This one is a tough one. It is that...]

Point #3 – God's servants live with unguarded hearts. (Verses 11-13)

Hurtful things happen and so we need to fight against a desire to close off our affections towards those who hurt us.

Look with me at what is written here in verse 11.

Some commentators consider Paul's mention of the Corinthians here to be particularly significant in terms of emphasis.

It is very rare for Paul to mention the church he is writing to by name after the opening address.

It is like he is saying, "Hey guys remember I am talking directly to you!"

The phrase "spoken freely" likely suggests that nothing has been held back from them.

He has never tried to hide anything, he has never tried to white wash things, he has never tried to inflate their egos for personal gain, and he has always tried to give them the truth in a straight forward and understandable manner.

Why? Because he says, "our heart is wide open."

That means he and his companions have never attempted to hold back for the sake of sparing themselves emotional pain.

It is one thing to say such a thing to people who are easy to get along with and with whom you have a good relationship.

It is another thing to say that to people who have grieved you in some way.

As we have worked through 2Corinthians we have seen that there is plenty of reason for the Apostle to have a guarded heart.

We know from chapter one and two that there had been a significant problem in the church that required the apostle to say some hard things.

We know that there were people in the church who were saying some untrue and hurtful things about Paul and that there was a group within the church that was trying to turn people away from Paul.

We also need to keep in mind that Paul worked day and night among the Corinthians so that they might be established in the gospel.

So here is a group of people who he has poured blood, sweat, and tears into and there are a number of them ready to kick him to the curb.

Stop for a minute and think about how you would feel. Would you have an “open heart” towards such people?

That is a tough one isn't it?

That, I believe, is especially true when it happens in the church.

Why? Because we expect better from people who name the name of Jesus, don't we?

You know what, we should! We absolutely should because from what we have read so far in this text and in many other places in the Bible, being right with God through Jesus and having the Holy Spirit is supposed to make a difference.

Because of those expectations it can sting a little extra when people sin against us and it can make us guard our hearts against such things.

Paul and his coworkers show us something different here, they keep their hearts open towards the Corinthian church.

[It reminds me of the example of the LORD Himself. Think about this, when did Jesus know Judas would betray Him? John's gospel says He knew from the beginning. He still cared for him, fed him with miracles, saved him from a sinking boat, and perhaps most telling of all washed his feet just hours before his betrayal.]

That is our example brothers and sisters.

That is the example the apostle is following here and that is the example he is asking the Corinthians and us to follow as well.

He says, “Widen your hearts also” at the end of verse 13.

Why? Because every Christian is a servant of God in one form or another and that is what we are called to as His servants.

How do we do that? You might ask. That is a good question. The answer is to have the needs of our heart satisfied in Christ.

When we stop looking to people to give us what only Jesus can give us, then it opens our hearts to give affection instead of seeking to take it from others.

Does that mean that we stop feeling grief and pain when people hurt us?

No, Jesus felt that grief and the apostle Paul felt that kind of pain.

Does it mean we volunteer to be piñatas and door mats?

It may appear that way to unbelievers, but as believers we are called to stand against evil and can never help others to do things in disobedience to the LORD.

It does mean being humble in serving people who don't deserve it.

It helps to remember that is exactly what the LORD does for us every day.

It means we let go of things like bitterness, anger, and resentment.

It means we are eager to forgive and restore relationships rather than close up our hearts towards people.

It's a high calling to be a servant of God.

Looking at these verses, especially the last three, I am so thankful that we are His servants by grace and not works.

If it were by works it would be impossible because the fact is we don't always work at God's work, we are a hindrance to people coming to Jesus at times, and at times we have guarded hearts.

Praise the Lord for His grace this morning.

Let's not receive it in vain, that is to no effect.

Let us instead be reminded that we are called to be about His work, called to help people come to Jesus, and called to live with unguarded hearts.

It is not easy, but it is glorious of grace to be Servants of God.