

2 Corinthians 6:3-7:1
(Psalm 22:22-28; Luke 12:22-34)
“What Commends You As Belonging to Christ?”

Introduction

Paul’s enemies have sought to discredit his ministry and to put a stumbling block in the path of anyone who would follow him. Paul has answered their charges, reminding us of the paradoxical nature of our calling: we are only jars of clay, made of the same stuff as the earth, yet God has entrusted to us the twin tasks of making him known to the world (for the “treasure” in jars of clay is the knowledge of God’s glory), and of offering grace and forgiveness in his name (for we are “Christ’s ambassadors”). Those who are perishing, resisting God’s offer of grace, look at us and only see the jar of clay, while those who are being saved see the glory of the treasure shining through.

In a hostile world where few accept God’s gracious offer of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is easy to get an attitude, to begin to think, “If they don’t accept the life I am offering them in Christ’s name then, literally, to hell with them. They are only getting what they deserve.” But that was never Paul’s attitude. He says, “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” (6:3,4). He proceeds to a litany of the things he has faced, things he has done and had done to him in his years of ministry. It is a record of triumph and disaster, and, remarkably, he sees all of it – whether victory or defeat – as commending the authenticity of his ministry.

The fact that Paul’s view of things is so different from that of his opponents should not surprise us. But the fact that his view of things is also so very different from that of many of us should get us asking ourselves some hard questions: Why do we who identify with the gospel of Jesus Christ too often share the same world view as Christ’s enemies, a view that considers what this world calls victory and success to be the sure mark of God’s favor, and what this world calls failure and defeat to be a sure sign that God is not with us?

Let me ask it differently: *What commends you as one entrusted with the knowledge of the glory of God? What marks you as an Ambassador of Christ, God himself making his appeal through you?*

Paul calls us to a different view of things than the view of the world around us, a view that enables us, not only to endure tough times but also to make sense of them, a view that enables us to face whatever life brings, and to realize that our great God and king can as easily get glory and work for our good and the good of those around us through what seems to be failure as he can through what seems to be success.

There are four distinct themes winding themselves through these verses that serve well as a series of questions to ask our selves this morning.

Body

1. Do your troubles commend you?

Paul speaks freely here of the difficulties he has faced while seeking to follow Christ. At first reading, what really stand out are the troubles Paul has seen: “by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (6:4,5). One cannot read the Acts of the Apostles without seeing Paul as a heroic figure. He endured so much, yet never gave up. Truly he could write to Timothy as he saw death approaching, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

But that does not explain how he could think that his troubles commended him as a man of God. Many people have suffered, some with great courage and nobility. *The key is in this: Paul's troubles arose as he followed Christ, not as he ran from Christ.* Paul was not suffering because he had broken the law, or because he had been caught in questionable behavior. His watchword was this: “We put no obstacle in anyone’s way.” Before he chose a course of action, before he set a new direction, he asked, “How will my actions affect others?” He did not seek to please others, but to please Christ. He had many enemies. Yet he did not act to hurt his enemies, but simply to do what he believed God would have him do, and to put nothing in the way of others that would cause them to stumble.

So we should ask ourselves of the troubles we have faced or may now be facing: Are they the result of our obedience or disobedience to Christ? Have we lost friends, have we been the object of accusations, have our families or jobs been put at risk because of our own foolishness, or because of our integrity in living as God’s children? Have troubles come as we followed Christ or as we ran from him? Paul calls us here to be sure that, when we face trouble as we all will, it is not because we have neglected our high calling as those entrusted with the treasure of the knowledge of God’s glory, as those entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation.

2. Do your enemies commend you?

Closely related to the first question is this second: If you have enemies, people who have set themselves against you, who refuse to sit down with you and be reconciled to you, is it because you have acted toward them without integrity, or because they have misunderstood you, or perhaps listened to and believed lies about you? Paul had many enemies who were constantly

spreading lies about him. So he goes on to write, “through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as imposters, and yet are true” (6:8).

There are few things more painful than knowing that we are being lied about, but being unable to do anything to clear our name. Yet both Paul and Jesus faced this constantly. How did this commend them? Was Paul’s conscience clear before the only one who has the right of final judgment? If so, then he could conduct himself with proper confidence in the face of his accusers, entrusting himself to the Lord, who alone knows our hearts.

In the end, whatever else is said, the truth comes out. How we handle accusations is crucial. If we hate those who lie about us, if we try to get them back and make sure that they suffer, then we strew the path of the gospel with obstacles. If we bear with dignity the charges of those who hate us, or of those who do not know any better, then over time we commend ourselves to those who seek the truth.

3. Do your friends commend you?

What about our friends? Well, who are our friends? Paul tells us that we are not to be yoked together with unbelievers. But this can be misleading. You might think that he is saying that we should only have mature Christians as friends or business partners. Not so. Remember that the religious leaders of Jesus’ day hated him precisely because he associated with those that they considered irreligious. They asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with *them?*”

Paul, too, in his first Corinthian letter tells Christians that they *should* associate with those of this world who are immoral, greedy, swindlers and idolaters, because, Paul writes, those are the very people who most need to hear and experience the love and grace of God. How can we be Christ’s ambassadors if we don’t spend any time with those to whom he has sent us? Paul says that it is those who claim to be Christian, but live as if they were not, whom we should avoid, not red-blooded pagans who need the Lord (1 Corinthians 5:9-13).

Nevertheless, we can be friends with people without being “yoked” to them. There are friends, and then there are intimate friends. There are those we know, whom we love and long to see come to Christ, and then there are those with whom our lives are intertwined, those with whom we are of one heart and mind.

What of you? Who are those closest to your heart? If you are a Christian and yet have no soul friends who know your heart, who pray for you and hold

you accountable in your walk with Christ, your marriage, your work and play, then you have no friends to commend you as a child of God.

4. Does the Lord commend you?

Finally, *the only commendation that will enable us to stand in the day of the Lord is the Lord's own commendation*. Paul writes, "What agreement has the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God" (6:16).

When we begin to grasp the wonder of this, that God has come to us to make his home in us, that he is not "out there" but "in here," then everything begins to change. We are mortified at the selfishness, greed and impurity in our own hearts, at all that grieves the Holy Spirit and damages the intimacy and sweetness of our fellowship with him. As Paul writes, "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (7:1).

So the question here concerns whether or not we are seeking to purify both body and spirit, knowing how deeply the two are intertwined. What may we have permitted in our affections or in our behavior that has broken our fellowship with the one who has deigned to place his glory in jars of clay? Hear again the gospel entrusted to us: "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (6:2).

Conclusion

God offers us what we have always longed for: forgiveness of sin and guilt, removal of shame, peace with him and with those who seek his face, a life's work of infinite value and significance, intimacy with the source of all truth, goodness and beauty. When we are in league with him, it does not finally matter what comes, for troubles and enemies end up commending us as surely as do our friends: all these testify together that we are children of God, those entrusted with the treasure of his glory and the gospel of reconciliation. "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (7:1).

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