

# The Minister's Commendation: Endurance in Affliction

2 Corinthians 6:3-7

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## Introduction

We come again this morning to our study of Paul's Second Letter to the church at Corinth, so turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 6. And I'll read from verse 3 to verse 10: "We give no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,<sup>4</sup> but in everything we commend ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses,<sup>5</sup> in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,<sup>6</sup> in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love,<sup>7</sup> in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left,<sup>8</sup> by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true;<sup>9</sup> as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death,<sup>10</sup> as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things."

I want to begin this morning by asking: What is the greatest hindrance to Gospel ministry? What puts the most significant obstacle in the way of successful evangelism? And I think the right answer to that question is: the greatest hindrance to Gospel ministry is that so many who profess to be saved by the Gospel don't proclaim it to others. And we've spoken much about every Christian's duty to preach the Gospel—how every person saved by the Gospel has been called to the ministry of that Gospel, how every member of the New Covenant is a minister of the New Covenant.

But let's assume that Christians *are* speaking the Gospel. Aside from not evangelizing at all, what is the greatest obstacle to successful evangelism? Some people would say that secularism is the greatest hindrance to Gospel ministry. It's the increasingly prevailing worldview in our culture that religion ought to be a merely private matter, not discussed with anyone outside of one's church, and abolished from the public square. Some people might say skepticism is the greatest hindrance—the fact that people are increasingly skeptical of what they can't see and touch, and so are hesitant to accept a message that requires them to trust something they can't prove empirically. Others might answer that evolution is the greatest stumbling block to Gospel ministry. The majority of the scientific community attacks the account of the creation of the world in the opening chapters of Genesis, and therefore Christianity is looked upon as intellectually dishonest and anti-scientific. Some people might say that Fundamentalist Islam is the great hindrance to the preaching of the Gospel. After all, there are many Muslim-controlled countries in which it's illegal to be a Christian or to preach the Gospel to others. And plenty of

people—even plenty of people who call themselves Christians; and even plenty of people who call themselves *evangelical* Christians—have been saying that the greatest hindrance to Gospel ministry is the church’s lack of cultural relevance. We just don’t understand the secularism, and the skepticism, and the moral relativism, and the thirst for authenticity of millennial post-modernists. If we could better understand the tastes and preferences of our target audience, and adapt our methods and fine-tune our message to show our culture that what we have to say is relevant to them, well then we’d see revival.

But the greatest hindrance to Gospel ministry is not secularism; it’s not skepticism; it’s not the doctrine of evolution; it’s not radical Islam; and it’s certainly not cultural irrelevance. Rather, the greatest obstacle to successful evangelism is when those who profess to be saved by the Gospel that rescues from sin conduct themselves in a way that contradicts the message that they preach. We’ve heard it a million times: “Aw, I don’t want to go to church! The Church is filled with a bunch of hypocrites!” And while it might be quite accurate to respond to that kind of protest by informing them that there’s room for one more hypocrite at church—that is, the objector himself fails to live up to his own moral standard and so is *also* a hypocrite—that is the prevailing sentiment. “I don’t want to listen to a standard being imposed upon me that Christians themselves don’t uphold! Don’t tell me I ought to live my life in a certain way while you yourself fail to live that way!”

And we understand that, don’t we? There is universal contempt for those who insist that you do as they say but not as they do. And within the world of professing Christianity, that’s nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the case of pastors who have gone through some kind of moral failure. When we hear of an influential pastor whom so many trusted stepping out of the ministry because of heavy-handed, domineering leadership, or because of marital infidelity, or because of the abuse of alcohol, there is a special kind of sadness—and a special kind of disgust—that the people of God experience, because we feel like we’ve been betrayed, and because we know the shame it brings upon the name of Christ. And the enemies of the Gospel scoff and say, “*He* preaches that Jesus *saves* from sin, and opens the heart to see the ugliness of sin and the beauty of righteousness, and then he goes and does that?! Some Gospel! Some Savior!” And it’s just heart-wrenching.

Now, it’s important to say that your life—no matter how well-lived—is not the Gospel. Contrary to the popular clichés of evangelicalism, you cannot *live* the Gospel; you cannot “preach the Gospel and use words if necessary.” The Gospel must be preached with words; preaching is an inherently verbal activity. And no matter how chaste your life is, you cannot live the Gospel. Only One Man lived well enough to do that. Jesus Christ is the only One who has lived the Gospel, because it is only by *His* life, death, and resurrection that our sins can be forgiven and our righteousness can be provided. And still more, the Gospel message itself is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, Romans 1:16. The power of the Gospel is not shackled by

the failures of the sinful men and women who preach it. To suggest that it is would be to demean the power of the Gospel. No, the Gospel faithfully preached is powerful and glorious enough to overcome even the sinful failures of you and me, its preachers.

However, none of that changes the fact that the most compelling *evidence* for the reality of the message you preach—the most beautiful *adornment* for the truth of the Gospel, which you proclaim saves people from the penalty and power of sin—is the demonstrable, purifying *work* of that Gospel having taken effect in your own life. To see the evidence of the Holy Spirit at work! That the Spirit is progressively ministering the grace of sanctification in your life, just as surely as He has ministered the grace of justification in your life. And that means, conversely, that the most powerful hindrance to the Gospel—that which most obscures the Gospel's glory and majesty and power to save—is someone who seems to be enslaved to the very sin they profess to have been saved from.

The Apostle Paul understood that reality. That's why the attacks of the false apostles against his character were so serious, and it's why he is so concerned, throughout this letter of 2 Corinthians, to defend his integrity to the Corinthians. In order to make room for their own heresy, these false apostles were doing everything they could to undermine Paul's credibility as a true minister of Christ. And the Corinthians had bought into these lies and began questioning the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship, and therefore, the legitimacy of the Gospel that Paul preached. And that has launched Paul on an extended definition and defense of the Christian ministry—a defense both of the content of the message and the conduct of the messenger.

And as we come through to the end of chapter 5 into chapter 6, Paul has just come to a culmination of the defense of his message. Chapter 5 verse 14 through to chapter 6 verse 2 comprise one of the richest presentations of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that you'll find in all of Scripture. And we have examined and celebrated that Gospel as we've preached through that passage, feasting on such doctrines as (a) penal substitutionary atonement: that Christ died as a substitutionary sacrifice to pay the penalty of His people; of (b) representative headship: that we are so united to Christ our head that His life counts for our life, His death for our death, His resurrection for our resurrection; of (c) particular redemption: that Christ's sacrifice was not for a nameless, faceless group, but for His sheep whom He personally knows by name, and that it wasn't a potential atonement but an actual, efficacious accomplishment of salvation. We celebrated the doctrine of (d) lordship salvation: that Jesus died not only to justify sinners but to sanctify them, and that all who are freed from the penalty of sin are also freed from its power, and are progressively being freed from its presence. We rejoiced in the doctrine of (e) monergistic regeneration: that God sovereignly recreates us by granting the new birth; of (f) the reconciliation accomplished by Christ on the cross which overcomes the alienation between holy God and sinful man; and of (g) justification—that sinners can be declared righteous upon the ground of the imputation of our sins to Christ, and the imputation of His righteousness to us,

received through faith alone apart from works. Paul has clearly defined the message he preaches to the Corinthians.

And as glorious as that Gospel is, there is a risk of it all coming to naught in the lives of the Corinthians if they decide that the false apostles' attacks against Paul are true, and that he's not a credible and trustworthy minister.

### **The Commendation of God's Minister (vv. 3–4a)**

And so once again, Paul takes up a defense not only of his message but also of his own character, in order to demonstrate to the Corinthians that he is a legitimate and trustworthy servant of Christ—that nothing he has done ought to cast doubt on the veracity of his message. And so he writes, in chapter 6 verses 3 and 4: “We give no cause for offense in anything,”—or, as the ESV has, “We put no obstacle in anyone's way”—“so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything, as ministers of God, we commend ourselves by much endurance.”

We learn from these verses that the servant of God—genuine ministers sent from Christ—are characterized by the earnest desire to put no obstacle or stumbling block in anyone's way, that he add no unnecessary offense to the offense of the Gospel message itself. You say, “Wait a minute, isn't the Gospel offensive? Doesn't Paul himself say in 1 Corinthians 1:23, ‘We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness’? Doesn't he quote Isaiah 8:14 in Romans 9:33 when it speaks of Messiah as ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense’? And doesn't the very catalogue of his sufferings that follow in this passage prove that Paul offended just about everybody everywhere he went?!”

Yes, but that's just it. It was the *Gospel* that was the obstacle, not Paul's life. It was *the cross* that was the stumbling block, not Paul's character. It was *Christ* who was the rock of offense, not any harshness or boorishness of Paul's personality. This passage isn't talking about the necessary offense that is inherent to the Gospel of God's sovereign grace. It's talking about any offense Paul may have added to the Gospel by an undisciplined life or inconsiderate manner of proclamation.

And why was it always his aim to give no offense? Again, verse 3: “So the ministry will not be discredited.” So that no reproach would be brought upon the name of Christ or the Gospel by which He is made known in the world. The word “discredited” is used nowhere else in the New Testament except in 2 Corinthians 8:20, where Paul explains that he has taken every precaution to be above reproach in the transmission of money from church to church “so that no one will *discredit* us in our administration of this generous gift.” Paul is saying, “I make it my earnest endeavor to never let anything about me or my life be used as a legitimate excuse to bring shame upon the Gospel.” He knew what God had said about the Israelites; he alludes to Ezekiel 36 in

Romans 2:24 when he tells the Jews, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” What a terrifying thing to hear! The wonderful, blessed name of the infinitely holy God—the name worthy of all praise and adoration and worship—is blasphemed because of *you*! Paul wanted no part of that indictment. And so he conducted himself in the most scrupulous way to ensure that Christ and His cross was the only stumbling block that he’d put in anyone’s way.

And we can learn from this, friends—fellow ministers of the Gospel! As we said before, your life is not what makes the Gospel effective, and therefore you cannot put the Gospel into shackles. But you *can* bring shame upon the ministry of the truth. You *can* blaspheme the name of your God among the nations by conducting yourself in a way that contradicts the message of forgiveness and transformation that you preach. John Calvin wrote, “It is an artifice of Satan to seek some misconduct on the part of ministers which may tend to the dishonor of the gospel; for when he has been successful in bringing the ministry into contempt all hope of progress is destroyed: therefore the man who wishes to serve Christ with usefulness must apply himself with all possible diligence to preserve the honor of the ministry” (248–49).

Are you applying yourself with all possible diligence to put the sanctifying power of the Gospel on display? Are you making diligent efforts to make progress in personal holiness so as to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect? Take an inventory of your life—of your daily conduct as you go about your business—and ask yourself, “Are there any unnecessary obstacles or stumbling blocks that we put in the way of others coming to see and savor the glory of God in the face of Christ?”

You ask, “Like what?” Well, in the purity of your speech. Do you use the same coarse language as unbelievers? I’ll tell you: I have been freshly discouraged by how many professing believers I see using unwholesome language, especially on social media recently. Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. We who have been the recipients of such marvelous grace ought always to have a word of praise to God on our lips. As James says, how can we use the same tongue to bless God and curse the people made in His image (3:9)? Very related to that: Is your speech marked by joyful thanksgiving, or bitterness and complaining? Paul says in Philippians 2:14 that it’s as we do all things without grumbling or disputing that we’ll prove ourselves children of God above reproach, and distinguish ourselves from this crooked and perverse generation. We who know we deserve hell, and yet have been forgiven from the penalty of our sins—what could we possibly have to complain about? Any moment we’re not in hell is better than we deserve! So how can we preach this Gospel of the all-wise God who sovereignly governs all the circumstances of our life, and yet be marked by grumbling and complaining?

And there are any number of applications: How can we who preach Christ as the Truth bear false witness—you know, fudge the truth unto our own advantage? How can we who have sold all to

lay hold of the treasure chest of holy joy that is Christ Jesus walk about in constant gloominess and depression? How can we who preach salvation as a free gift fail to imitate the Lord in lavish generosity? How can we participate in off-color jokes while we preach a Gospel of purity and holiness?

We need to examine ourselves. Because what the people we minister to need most from us as their ministers—what the lost world needs most from us, what our brothers and sisters in Christ need most from us, what our kids need most from us—is not our cleverness, not our sense of style, not our cultural-relevance, not our philosophical broad-mindedness, not even our spiritual giftedness! What they need most from us is our godliness. The world needs to be confronted by Gospel preachers who live consistently with the message we preach. Our fellow believers need us to have been with God—that when they deal with us, they have a sense that we have been in the presence of God, and we know Him and His ways. Our kids, more than a disciplinarian *or* a friend, need to know that Mom and Dad *know God*, and live in the light of His presence always, and aren't one way in public and another way in private! As Robert Murray M'Cheyne famously said, "It is not so much great talents God blesses as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God." It is a needed and welcome exercise for all of us: search your hearts, examine yourselves, and ask yourselves if your life tells the truth about the Gospel you preach and minister to others.

But the particular application that Paul gives in this text is endurance in the face of suffering for the Gospel. Look again at our passage: "We put no obstacle in anyone's way so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything, as ministers of God, we commend ourselves *by much endurance*." Endurance speaks of "the ability to stand up under the pressure of adversity and to [withstand] suffering . . . of fortitude under persecution and unremitting adherence to the faith" (Harris, 471). Pastor John describes it as "bearing up under hard labor, surviving the shock of battle, and remaining steadfast in the face of death" (226). And another writer calls it "a refusal to quit, a commitment to persevere in spite of the worst imaginable pain and the most oppressive of circumstances . . . without resorting to complaint or bitterness or a self-serving victim mentality" (Storms, 195).

You see, it's easy for someone to commend themselves as one whose life matches his message when the ministry is going well, when the pews are packed with people and the offering plates are full. You can put on a good face in the midst of pleasant circumstances. But trials, difficulties, afflictions—they bring out who you really are, your true character. Paul says, "You've observed my conduct in the midst of great hardships, and it's not been the conduct of someone who cuts corners to avoid unpleasantness! It's been that of steadfast endurance in the face of the most harrowing of temptations to waver in devotion and faithfulness to my mission. He says it in chapter 7 verse 2: "We wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one." And verse 4: "I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction!" And so you see, while

the false apostles use Paul's many sufferings as an indictment against his apostolic legitimacy, Paul knows that the Christian ministry is not one in which the minister makes demands upon God but in which God makes demands upon the minister! It's not the minister who makes a positive confession and "names and claims" their blessings from God; it's God who exercises His sovereign Lordship and names and claims a life of enduring obedience from His ministers!

So Paul's overarching concern in this text is to demonstrate that the life he's lived has not put any legitimate stumbling block in the way of those who would believe the message he preaches. And the mark of his genuineness is not that God has blessed him with an easy life full of comforts and pleasures, but that God has blessed him with the *steadfast endurance* to withstand all manner of hardships and afflictions without wavering in faithfulness or devotion to Christ and His Gospel.

And *in* his self-commendation to the consciences of the Corinthians, he further defines the nature of the Christian ministry—the ministry to which you and I, and all who truly belong to Christ, have been called. And there are **three elements** of Gospel ministry that Paul outlines in verses 3 to 10. **First**, he details the **difficult circumstances** of Gospel ministry in verses 4 and 5; **second** he lists the **sustaining graces** by which he is strengthened to endure those difficult circumstances, in verses 6 and 7; and **third** he enumerates the **defining paradoxes** by which the ministry is characterized, in verses 8 to 10. The difficult circumstances, the sustaining graces, and the defining paradoxes. And we'll hope to cover the first two of those this morning, and we'll get to the third next time.

## **I. The Difficult Circumstances of Gospel Ministry (vv. 4b–5)**

Let's look first, then, at **the difficult circumstances of Gospel ministry**. And we see these in the latter part of verse 4 and into verse 5. In what the fourth-century church father John Chrysostom called Paul's "blizzard of troubles," the apostle outlines nine tribulations, which can be grouped nicely into three sets of three.

The first three speak of Paul's difficult circumstances in more general terms. He speaks of endurance, verse 4, "in afflictions, in hardships, [and] in distresses." "Afflictions" comes from the word *thlipsis*, which communicates the idea of being pressed, or being under pressure. It's the most general term for describing any kind of distress or tribulation, and Paul uses it often to describe his circumstances—especially in 2 Corinthians. Everywhere he went, persecution and affliction pressed in on him. He says in chapter 1 verse 8, "We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength." He told the churches in Acts 14:22 that the path to the kingdom of God is the path of affliction; he said, "Through many afflictions we must enter the kingdom of God." And in Acts 20:23 he tells the Ephesian elders that he's heading to Jerusalem even though "the Holy

Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.” But is he deterred from his mission? No, he endures this affliction. The next verse says, “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus.”

“Hardships” connotes the idea of being under compulsion or in distress. When Paul instructs the Corinthians about giving later in chapter 9 verse 7, he uses this word to say they must not give “under compulsion.” In 1 Corinthians 7:37, Paul explains that no one ought to give his daughter in marriage “under constraint.” Elsewhere the word is translated as “distresses” (1 Cor 7:26; 2 Cor 12:10). Charles Hodge wrote that this word describes a man is taxed to the utmost and doesn’t know what to do or how to bear (534). Certainly this is an apt designation for the three times, according to 2 Corinthians 11:25, that Paul was shipwrecked and spent a night and a day adrift at sea.

“Distresses” is similar to the previous, in that it speaks of confinement in a narrow space. It’s to be in a tight spot, or in dire straits. One commentator says the word refers to “situations of utter perplexity in which Christ’s servant is faced with difficulties, which, humanly speaking, appear to be insoluble” (Hughes, 224). It seems there’s just no way of escape. Paul testifies here that afflictions, hardships, and distresses characterize the life of the faithful servant of God.

The second set of three words moves from the general to the more specific. At the beginning of verse 5, Paul says he commends himself by endurance “in beatings, in imprisonments, [and] in tumults.” Later on in chapter 11, verses 24 and 25, Paul refers to five times when the Jews whipped him with 39 lashes and three times that he was beaten with rods. Acts 16:22 records one of those latter instances as the chief magistrates of Philippi ordered Paul and Silas to be “beaten with rods;” the next verse says they were “struck with many blows.” And in 1 Corinthians 4:11, Paul describes this rough treatment as an ordinary fact of life. He says, “To this present hour we are hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, and *kolaphizometha*”—literally, we are struck with the fist.

These beatings were often accompanied with imprisonments. When the crowd in Philippi had struck Paul and Silas with many blows, the next phrase is in Acts 16:23 is: “they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely.” And while that’s the only imprisonment recorded in Scripture by the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, we know Paul was imprisoned in Rome at least twice more after he wrote this letter, and that there were many that weren’t recorded in Scripture, because in 2 Corinthians 11:23 he says that he had experienced “far more imprisonments” than the false apostles.

And then there were “tumults,” or perhaps more familiar, “riots.” And it seemed that in every single city Paul traveled to a riot was sure to follow. In Pisidian Antioch, Acts 13:50, the Jews “instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of their district.” In

Iconium, Acts 14:5, “an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers to mistreat and stone” Paul. In Lystra, the Jews won over the crowds and stoned Paul (14:19). We already read of the angry mob in Philippi in Acts 16. In Thessalonica, Acts 17:5–7 says the Jews “formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.” And when they didn’t find who they were looking for they dragged anyone they could find before the authorities and accused them of treason. And when Paul fled to Berea, the Thessalonian Jews followed him and stirred up the crowds there (17:13)! In Corinth, Paul was dragged before the proconsul Gallio (18:12–17). In Ephesus, there was the famous mob in the Amphitheater (19:23–20:1). And when he finally got to Jerusalem, Acts 21:27 says, “The Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowds and laid hands on him.” And yet in the midst of all this rioting, Paul endured, unwavering.

The final set of three tribulations speaks of those hardships to which a minister’s single-minded commitment often compels him. In the second half of verse 5, Paul says that he commends himself to the Corinthians by his endurance “in labors, in sleeplessness, [and] in hunger.” “Labors” comes from the Greek word that means laborious toil to the point of exhaustion. The New Testament uses the word to refer to his tentmaking, which he labored at so he could earn his own money and not drain the resources of those to whom he was ministering. 2 Thessalonians 3:8 says, “Nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with *labor* and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you.” But it also refers to the tireless labors he expended in Gospel ministry—constantly traveling, preaching, teaching, building relationships with leaders in newly established churches, caring for the needs of the poor, overseeing the interests of each church, enduring the riots and beatings and imprisonments, all while working part-time as a tentmaker!

These labors often led to “sleeplessness.” We just read earlier that he labored “night and day” in order not to be a burden. We learn in Acts 20 verse 7 that it wasn’t unusual for him to preach until midnight, and, verse 11, to speak with the brothers through the night until daybreak. He also says, in Acts 20:31, that night and day for three years he didn’t cease to admonish each one of the Ephesians with tears. If the occasion called for it, Paul gladly gave up his time to sleep to devote himself to the ministry of the Word among the brethren and to prayer to God. And just as his devotion to his ministry would drive him to give up sleep, so also were there times when he’d rather skip a meal than lose an opportunity to preach, teach, or admonish in the Word of God. The man was tireless! And he remained steadfast and immovable in all of his labors, because, as he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:58, he knew that his toil was not in vain in the Lord.

Dear friends, *these* are the **circumstances of Gospel ministry**! This “blizzard of troubles” as Chrysostom called them, they are not God’s chastisement for unfaithfulness. They are not signs of God’s displeasure and withdrawal of blessing. The Lord Jesus Christ was the most God-blessed Person to have ever lived, and His life was marked by suffering, by repeated affliction, and by humiliation! And the slave is not greater than His Master. The Christian life, friends—the

life of radically sacrificial service to church and to the world—is not supposed to be easy. God has designed it to be difficult, so that you would be emptied of your own resources and would flee to Him for the divine strength necessary to faithfully endure. So don't interpret difficult circumstances as divine displeasure; see them as opportunities to put the power of God on display in your weakness, and to commend yourself as a genuine servant of God by patient endurance.

But then, I must also put to you the question: Are you willing to embrace this life as the normal course of a minister of God? Do you understand that *this* is what you're signing up for when you determine to follow Christ? Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12 that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted!" and in Philippians 1:29 that "it has been granted to you for Christ's sake not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake"—that Christian suffering is just as much a gift of God as is saving faith! Now, you may not be beaten or imprisoned for the Gospel's sake—although you may very well be, if you're faithful to Christ in this culture for too much longer! But are you possessed of that Spirit-born disposition that, in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ, is ready to suffer the loss of all things for the sake of Christ if the Lord should will it so? Has He so captivated your heart that you are ready for the rod? ready for the stocks? ready for the lashes, rather than forsake your Savior, and the mission He's called you to?

And still further, I ask you: Do you recognize this in your life of ministry? Do you see any of these afflictions in your own life? You have been called to ministry! And while, again, we may not suffer in precisely the same ways, we preach the same Gospel message that Paul preached to the Corinthians, and it is no less subversive to the prevailing thought in our culture than it was in Paul's culture. But is your life at all marked by this devotion to radically sacrificial service of one another in the church, and of the lost in the world?

Have you been acquainted with the afflictions, hardships, and distresses of life-on-life, face-to-face ministry? Have you felt the hunger pangs imposed by devotion to seeking the Lord's face and strength in desperate prayer? By persisting in an evangelistic conversation, or a counseling appointment, or a discipleship meeting that was too important to cut short, even for your next meal? Have you been wearied in your ministerial task? Have you labored to the point of exhaustion? Have you willingly laid aside hours for sleep in order to minister to one another? There have been a handful of times when I've known something of what that's been like. And as much as I have to wrestle with my own heart that loves comfort, and rest, and ease, those times of intense labor in ministry have been among the richest times of communion with Christ that I've ever had, because I'd been emptied of my resources and driven to rely on His. I've said it often: The best kind of tired is Gospel tired.

Dear friends, are we ministering in such a way that upsets the world? That's what the Thessalonian Jews accused Paul of: "These men have turned the world upside down by their preaching and their allegiance to the kingship of Jesus!" Are we taking the Gospel of the Lordship of Christ to the *crowds* of our communities? Would our lives and our messages ever result in a riot stirred up by the enemies of righteousness?

## II. The Sustaining Graces of Gospel Ministry (vv. 6–7)

These are the difficult circumstances of Gospel ministry. And we have been called to follow Paul's example, as servants of God, to commend ourselves by faithful endurance in these difficult circumstances. But the question is: How can we do that? By what means does the faithful minister endure these difficulties? Paul answers that question by delineating **the sustaining graces of Gospel ministry**. In verses 6 and 7, Paul outlines nine spiritual virtues by which the Lord enables His ministers to triumphantly endure all our afflictions.

First, he conducts himself "in purity"—in purity both of morals and in intention, in behavior as well as attitude. He speaks about this purity in chapter 1 verse 12, when he says that the testimony of his conscience is that he conducted himself "in holiness and godly sincerity" both in the world and toward the church. He doesn't try to deceive them by cloaking his meaning in ambiguous platitudes; there are no hidden meanings or secret agendas in his letters. He writes nothing else to them but what they can read and understand, on the surface and in black and white, with no need to read between the lines. In chapter 4 verse 2, he says, "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." Paul is not posturing or maneuvering with the Corinthians. He doesn't downplay the difficult demands of the Gospel so as to ingratiate himself to them. Their behavior toward him might tempt him to soften his message or his interactions with them, but he endures the hardship of their distrust and their sorrow, and loves them enough to always tell them the truth. He says again, "Make room for us in your hearts; we wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one." Paul endured affliction in purity.

Second, he endured "in knowledge." Knowledge of the truth as gleaned from an intimate, personal relationship of communion with Christ is the absolute bedrock of faithful endurance. In regeneration, God had shone in Paul's heart, chapter 4 verse 6, to give "the light of the *knowledge* of the glory of God in the face of Christ." And as Paul strengthened and deepened that knowledge of Christ born in regeneration as he strenuously pursued Christ in sanctification, his character was shaped by that transforming relationship. And he found, Colossians 2:3, that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, that Christ Himself is the divine Word, the dispenser of all truth. And as he faced his multiple tribulations, he drew from his knowledge of the truth of God's Word, and he preached that truth to himself and trusted in the

promises of God. This knowledge caused him to be understanding and discerning, so that he could accurately size up a situation and adopt an appropriate course. And we see his wisdom and his tact illustrated in how deftly he deals with the Corinthians—whether to visit them or write them, whether to write severely or endearingly. His knowledge of the truth was the foundation of his endurance (MacArthur, 228).

Paul also endures his trials by “patience [and] kindness.” And these are a pair of words that are often found together. We see them in next to one another in the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, and in the parallel passage in Colossians 3:12. We see them leading the list of virtues that define love itself in 1 Corinthians 13:4: “Love is patient, love is kind.” “Patience” refers to the kind of longsuffering forbearance that endures hardship and evil without being provoked to anger or retaliation. And where patience is more reactive, “kindness” is more proactive; someone who is kind labors to secure someone’s practical benefit, with an air of ease, pleasantness, and goodness. Paul did not endure his afflictions by despairing, by abandoning hope in Christ, by losing his temper and flying off in fits of rage, or by exacting vengeance on those who mistreated them. He says in 1 Corinthians 4:12, “When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we *respond graciously*” (HCSB). Paul endured by patience and kindness.

Then, it’s as if Paul is reminded by mentioning patience and kindness together that all of these graces are the work of the Holy Spirit, and so he mentions the Spirit by name as the One who works these things in his heart. The patient endurance required of the servant of God can only be achieved as the Holy Spirit is at work in the soul of man, sanctifying him from the inside out and causing him to bear the fruit of righteousness.

He goes on to mention “genuine love,” *en agapē anupokritō*, literally, non-hypocritical love. The *hupokritēs* referred to “one who plays a part” on the stage. Someone who was *anupokritos* was someone who was a *bad* actor. And I love this! Genuine Christian ministers are bad actors! They are bad politicians! They’re not good at pretending to be someone they’re not! With them, what you see is what you get! One of the surest marks of lack of integrity is hypocritical, feigned love—someone who pretends to have your best interest at heart, who flatters you with empty compliments, but who has no genuine affection and concern for you. When a minister has to pretend to love the people he’s ministering to, he’s no genuine shepherd; he’s nothing more than a hireling, an actor, a hypocrite. And so Paul says in Romans 12:9, “Let love be without hypocrisy.”

Further, Paul endures in “the word of truth.” Ephesians 1:13 defines this word of truth as “the gospel of your salvation.” Colossians 1:5 speaks of “the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel.” So when Paul mentions the word of truth here, he is talking about his proclamation of the Gospel. No matter what adversities befall

the Christian minister, he doesn't waver in preaching the Gospel. No matter how severe the consequences are, the one whom God has made a minister cannot be silent concerning the Good News. In Acts 4, as the Sanhedrin held the Apostles on trial and threatened them with imprisonment if they continued preaching Jesus, Peter and John gave that famous answer, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for *we cannot stop speaking* about what we have seen and heard!" The prophet Jeremiah says, "I've become a laughingstock. All day long people mock me because of the message God has given me to proclaim." Jeremiah 20 verse 8: "For me the word of Yahweh has resulted in reproach and division all day long. But," verse 9, "if I say, 'I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,' then in my heart it becomes *like a burning fire shut up in my bones*; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it." Dear friends, this is the picture of the commendable servant of God! You are so ravished by the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor 4:4) that you couldn't stop speaking it if you tried! It would be like a fire shut up in your bones, that you simply can't hold in! No wonder Paul said, "Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

And it's that very fire in the bones that is "the power of God" manifesting itself in the proclamation of the word of truth. Paul endured by the power of God. When he was weak, he knew the power of God was mightily at work within him. When he lost all hope of survival, 2 Corinthians 1:9, it only made him look outside of himself to trust in the God who raises the dead. When he was made to feel like the earthen vessel that he was—breakable, replaceable, unimportant, and weak—it was then that the surpassing greatness of the power of God would be put on display. Paul was weak! He was no model of disinterested, self-sufficient, Stoical endurance! In his abject weakness, he was utterly dependent on the power of God to strengthen him as he steadfastly endured his afflictions for Christ's sake.

And finally, he endured "by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left." The Christian's life of joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction is a war, dear friends. It is a battle. It is an "unremitting conflict with the powers of darkness" (Hughes, 230). And we need to engage this battle with the proper weapons. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10, verses 3 to 5: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." We wage the war of *ideas*, the battle for *right thinking*. And Paul says he endured in that battle by taking up the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left. The shield for the left hand to defend against all ideological attacks advanced by the children of Satan, and the sword for the right hand to tear down ideological fortresses with the word of truth.

## Conclusion

Dear friends, what goes through your mind and your heart as we meditate on these nine sustaining graces of Gospel ministry? Do you know anything of these graces at work in your heart? Have you experienced something of the energizing power of purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, and genuine love—worked in your soul by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit? Have you tasted the sufficiency of the power of God strengthening you to faithfully endure the proclamation of the word of truth, even in the midst of the difficult circumstances of the ministry God has called you to? Whether the evangelism of the lost, the strengthening of the saints, or the discipleship of your children, have you discerned evidences of the Spirit working these graces in your heart?

Oh, may it be that we don't let this portion of the Word of God stray from our thoughts before we examine ourselves in its light, asking the Father whether we are able to commend ourselves as servants of God by much endurance in difficult circumstances through the sustaining graces which are at our disposal through Christ—whether we conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that our lives put no stumbling block in the way of our message. And where we fall short, brothers and sisters, may we look to Christ who has succeeded and obeyed in our place, rest in His forgiveness and righteousness, and press on in repentance and in renewed zeal for the work He's called us to do.