

Christ's Ambassadors

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

As a point of reminder (principally to myself) here are the principle themes and points of emphases in Paul's letter:

1. Christian ministry as servanthood, reflecting that of Christ;
2. the greater glory of the new covenant in contrast to the old;
3. the glory of the gospel exhibited in the weakness of its ministers; God's glory—and the power of the gospel—is not minimized, but enhanced, through the weakness of the "jars of clay" (2 Cor 4:7; cf. 12:7-10) who proclaim it;
4. the gospel as reconciliation;
5. giving to the poor as an expression of generosity, not of obligation.

In these unprecedented times, I appreciate Eugene Peterson's translation of the first ten verses of chapter 5.

5:1-10 (MSG)

1-5 *For instance, we know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven—God-made, not handmade—and we'll never have to relocate our "tents" again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move—and so we cry out in frustration.*

Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less.

6-8 *That's why we live with such good cheer. You won't see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Cramped conditions here don't get us down. They only remind us of the spacious living conditions ahead. It's what **we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going**. Do you suppose a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us? When the time comes, we'll be plenty ready to exchange exile for homecoming.*

9-10 *But neither exile nor homecoming is the main thing. **Cheerfully pleasing God is the main thing**, and that's what we aim to do, **regardless of our conditions**. Sooner or later we'll all have to face God, regardless of our conditions. We will appear before Christ and take what's coming to us as a result of our actions, either good or bad.*

An Unfurnished Shack...Our True Home

Paul used a familiar image to help his readers understand the unfamiliar: tents. He taught that in this life we have a "tent," an earthly body made of flesh and blood and bones. And when that tent is torn down—when we die—we will inhabit a new, everlasting dwelling.

Now, let's press this analogy a little bit. Have you ever spent time in a tent? If so, you know that it's a place where you'd only want to live for a short while. It's fun to camp out in a tent, but let's face it—you wouldn't want to call it home! It's hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and leaky when it rains. And the older it gets, the more it sags. Eventually, it frays and tears and rots. Paul expressed it pretty clearly:

For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; 3 inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. 4 For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. (vv. 2-5)

Physicians make their living listening to groaning tents. An orthopedic surgeon tries to keep the tent pegs from pulling loose, a dermatologist tries to keep the canvas in good shape, and general practitioners are always patching us up.

We groan because we are weary, rain-soaked campers longing for home (v. 2b). But when we shed this earthly tent from our shoulders, we will not be left naked and shivering (vv. 3-4). We will be clothed with immortality (1 Cor. 15:53-54). Like a huge down comforter, life—not death—will swallow us up (2 Cor. 5:4). To assure us of this, God gave us a deposit on our eternal home: the Holy Spirit (v. 5).

Absent from the Body...At Home with the Lord

Even greater than a new "tent" is the place it will be pitched, which was Paul's next word of encouragement to us:

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord — 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight — 8 we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (vv. 6-8. See Phil. 1:23)

While we are living in our earthly tents, we cannot have a tangible, visible, audible relationship with the Lord. We cannot walk by sight, so we walk by faith. But when we die, we will be at home with Him. We will hear His voice, touch His hands, see Him face-to-face. No wonder Paul preferred to be in heaven rather than here!

Our Present Ambition...Our Future Reward

Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. (v. 9)

The anticipation of heaven naturally stirs in us an ambition to please the One who graciously offers it to us. Hope motivates holiness. And as we aim to please God in this life, Paul assures us that God will reward us in the life to come.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (v. 10)

The Corinthian believers well understood the concept of a "judgment seat," or bema, in Greek. Paul himself had stood before the judgment seat of the Roman governor Gallio years before when hostile Jews accused the apostle of violating their religious laws (see Acts 18:12-17).

The bema of Christ, however, is different. Christ will not judge believers to determine innocence or guilt, for we are all declared righteous in Him (see 2 Cor. 5:21). **Our home in heaven is assured. At stake is our reward**, which will be determined by the quality of our deeds (see also 1 Cor. 3:10-15) and the motives behind our deeds (see (1 Cor. 4:4-5).

Interestingly, Paul didn't say what will be the divine compensation – only that it will be in proportion to the deed itself, "whether good or bad." **"The very things that we do, these we receive back,"** wrote commentator Paul Barnett.

Some false teachers in Corinth may have been teaching a popular Greek philosophy that only the soul mattered and sins of the body, such as sexual sins, were inconsequential. Paul's point here is that, although our tent is temporal, the "deeds of the body" are eternally important. Barnett summed up the thrust of Paul's message:

The sure prospect of the judgment seat reminds the Corinthians—and all believers—that while they are righteous in Christ by faith alone, the faith that justifies is to be expressed by love and obedience (Gal. 5:6, Rom. 1:5), and by pleasing the Lord (2 Cor. 5:9). Our "confidence" that we will be "with the Lord" (v. 8) is to be held in tension with the "fear of the Lord" (v. 11), from which we serve Him.

Paul Barnett, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament Series, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), p. 275.

Necessary Commands to Christ's Ambassadors

2 Corinthians 5 states that if we have been reconciled to God, then we have been given a ministry of reconciliation (v. 18). It is a ministry God has committed to each of us, not to a select few (v. 19). All of us are His ambassadors (v. 20).

2 Corinthians 5:20

"An Ambassador...is at once a messenger and a representative. He does not speak in his own name. He does not act on his own authority. What he communicates is not his own opinions or demands, but simply what he has been commanded to say." ...Ambassadors engaged upon human affairs are chosen especially for their **tact**, their **dignity** and their **courtesy**, and because they are gifted with persuasive powers. The ambassadors for Christ should show the same characteristics. They must never try to bludgeon men and women into the kingdom of God, but must speak the truth in love...by the gentleness and meekness of Christ."

R.V.G. Tasker, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), pp. 89-90.

Therefore, the portrait people see of ministry is a portrait of **us**. To make that representation as positive as possible, Paul gave two commands to every minister, every Christian.

Command #1 - 6:1-2

Do not receive the grace of God in **vain**:

As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. 2 For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. (6:1-2)

What does the word *grace* mean?

For several paragraphs Paul's letter urges us to model a New Covenant ministry, one that emphasizes the work of the Spirit as opposed to the work of the flesh. The work of the flesh is law-oriented; the work of the Spirit, on the other hand, is grace-oriented. The work of the flesh depends on self; the work of the Spirit depends on Christ. The work of the flesh focuses on the external and the temporal; the work of the Spirit focuses on the internal and the eternal.

Zech. 4:6 , So he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: '**Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,**' says the **LORD Almighty**."

This is Paul's theme: power through weakness. Christ made strong through jars of clay, etc.

See 2 Cor. 1:12; 2:14-17; 3:5; 4:5-7,18

2 Cor. 1:12, Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in

the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

2 Cor. 2:14, But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. **15** For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. **16** To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? **17** Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

2 Cor. 3:5 Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

2 Cor. 4:5, For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. **6** For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

2 Cor. 4:7, But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

2 Cor. 4:18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

The "day of salvation" should never be relegated to a past-tense experience. It should be lived out now, in the present, as we live by grace instead of by law.

How would you say others perceive you? If you married, would your spouse say your life is more grace-oriented or law-oriented? If you have children, what would they say?

Are you living freely by grace?

"The best critique of what's wrong is always the practice of something better" - Shane Claiborne

Command #2 - Cultivate credibility in ministry:

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. 4 Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way... (vv. 3-4a)

How can we keep the ministry from being discredited? By not putting a stumbling block in anyone's path (v. 3a) and by being servants (v. 4a). see Psa. 69:6

May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, the LORD Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel.

The Greek term for discredited is used only here and in 8:20. It means "to find fault or blame." The Hebrew equivalent is used in Proverbs 9:7 and is translated "insult" in the NIV and "dishonor" in the NASB.

The ministry can become insulted or dishonored when we break a promise, exploit people, live hypocritically, are unfaithful, compromise truth, become greedy, or expect special treatment.

Living out this prayer will go a long way toward keeping our ministries from being discredited:

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all the truth, O God of truth, deliver us. Deliver me."

The apostle urged integrity in ministry. But practically speaking, how does all this get worked out on a daily basis?

Realistic Characteristics of Ministering - 2 Corinthians 6:4b-10

In 2 Corinthians 6:4b-10, we have one of the clearest, most realistic descriptions of how to minister with integrity.

Realistic Circumstances – 6:4b-5

*"...in great **endurance**; in troubles, hardships and distresses; 5 in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger..."*
(vv.4b-5)

That's not exactly the description you'd expect to read in HIU's or Biola's or APU's brochure! Granted, not all ministry encounters are like this. But ministers must prepare themselves for pleasant and unpleasant times. In a word, they must **endure**.

If anyone has ever endured hardships for the sake of ministry, it's Paul. But because he set up his life as a model to others, we can learn from the various trials he endured.

First, he battled inner struggles—*troubles, hardships, and distresses*. His *troubles*, or "pressures" as the Greek root renders it, included concerns that pressed in and

weighed him down. His hardships required that he do without those things that make life comfortable and secure.

Phil. 4:12, *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of **being content** in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.*

Paul also experienced external troubles—*beatings, imprisonments, and riots*. His bearings were "physically torturous," his imprisonments were numerous, and his exposures to riotous situations landed him in the midst of violence, public outcries, and assaults.

And, finally, Paul endured the private disciplines of commitment to the cause—hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger. In all of this, he didn't lose heart.

September 28, 1944 (Churchill) – "**not in vain** may be the pride of those who survived and the epitaph of those who fell."

2 Cor. 4:16-18, *We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. **17** For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. **18** So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

How did Paul remain committed to the ministry and encouraged at heart while facing such torrential circumstances? And how can we adopt his attitude when we face similar ones? The next few verses provide an umbrella of attitudes to safeguard us against life's inclement situations.

Realistic Qualities - 6:6-7

In 6:6-7, Paul listed nine qualities that protected him in the stormy times:

in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; 7 in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left...

Four of these attributes are external attitudes, visible to other people:

- (1) purity, a clean lifestyle;
- (2) understanding, a practical awareness of truth;
- (3) patience, a calm in the midst of storms; and
- (4) kindness, a softness opposed to severity and harshness.

The remaining five wield their power in the hidden places of the heart:

- (1) the *Holy Spirit*, our deepest source of strength;
- (2) a *sincere love* for others that prompts our sacrificial giving of ourselves and our resources.
- (3) *truthful speech* we offer to others;
- (4) the *power of God* for endurance and provision; and
- (5) the *weapons of righteousness*, detailed in Ephesians 6:10-17.

Realistic Results - 2 Cor. 6:8a

Realistically, the results of our efforts will be mixed:

through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report... (2 Cor. 6:8a)

Paul's efforts were met with **some successes, some lukewarm receptions**, and **some downright violent resistance** to his outreach. In our own ministries, we can expect that some will respect and respond to us while others will resent us. Some will adore us; some will wish they never knew us. But we're in good company. Not only Paul but also Jesus experienced the same thing (see Mark 14:1-6).

Realistic Images - 2 Cor. 6:8b-10

Sometimes it's hard to know what image we project to others as Christians—especially if we've chosen ministry as our vocation. Truly, we don't need to be anything other than who and what we are. But what we are is a study in contrasts. We are

"...yet regarded as impostors; 9 known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; 10 sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything." (2 Cor. 6:8b-10)

The Message words these verses in a way that hits closer to home:

Our work as God's servants gets validated—or not—in the details.
People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly...in hard times, tough times, bad times; when we're beaten up, jailed, and mobbed; working hard, working late, working without eating; with pure heart, clear head, steady hand; in gentleness, holiness, and honest love; when we're telling the truth, and when God's showing his power; when we're doing our best setting things right; when we're praised, and when we're blamed; slandered, and honored; true to our word, though distrusted; ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all. (2 Cor. 6:4-10 MSG)

"Don't worry that children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you." ~ Robert Fulghum

A Final Word on Ministry

A large group of people over the age of ninety-five were asked the question, "If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?"

Their answers fell into three dominant categories. They said they would

- reflect more,
- risk more, and
- do more things that would live on after their death.

As we put the final brushstrokes on this realistic portrait of what it means to be Christ's ambassadors, take a look at the canvas of your own life. What do you see? What would you paint over if you had the chance?

What is your life amounting to? Are you playing everything safe? Will your pursuits live on after you die?

Allow me to close with these words for John Ortberg from his work, *The Me I Want To Be*:

"Don't ask for comfort. Don't ask for ease. Don't ask for manageability. Ask to be given a burden for a challenge bigger than yourself – one that can make a difference in the world, one that will require the best you have to give it...Ask for a task that will keep you learning and growing and uncomfortable and hungry. We cannot grow unless there has been a challenge to what is familiar and comfortable. The Spirit leads us into adventure. The Spirit leads us into a dangerous world. To ask for the Spirit is to ask for risk." (Page 247).