

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Enduring for the sake of the Gospel

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Later this year we will participate in both the Australian Census and the National Church Life Survey. Of great interest to many church leaders will be the gap between those who tick the 'Christian' box on the census, and those who actually regularly attend church. There's always been a considerable percentage of people who are believers but just cannot meaningfully connect with a local congregation. For some, the reason is people. People that profess the faith, that attend church on Sunday morning, but for the rest of the week their lives certainly don't show it. These are the people that St Paul writes to when he says, "As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain." Paul longs for the Corinthians' faith not to be meaningless.

If you read the whole of his second letter to the Corinthian church, it's clear that Paul was deeply hurt by accusations and insults coming from within a congregation that he had laboured long and hard to establish and nurture in the faith. He agonised over their spiritual well-being and was greatly concerned that the gospel message of reconciliation was being left behind. We can only imagine how tempted he might have been to simply wash his hands of the whole situation. But he didn't; he couldn't. Moved by the reconciling love of God in Christ, by Christ's own willingness to humble himself and to suffer and die, St Paul had to persevere in the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to him. He was willing to humble himself and make himself vulnerable, pleading with the Corinthians to be reconciled to God and to himself.

In the closing verses of chapter five, Paul powerfully proclaims the good news that in Christ we are a new creation. God has reconciled the world to himself by making him who had no sin, meaning Jesus, to be sin for us so that in him, in Jesus, we might become the righteousness of God. This was the message that needed to be proclaimed. And this God-given ministry of reconciliation was worth all the hardship Paul endured. And it's not a short list of things that he describes. There were the things he physically endured, the troubles and distresses. There were the things that others did to him, the beatings, imprisonments, and riots. There were the internal things that come with knowing you have much work to do, things like sleepless nights and hunger. I don't think we can ever truly comprehend how extreme all this was. In comparison, our lives are easy.

But we are reminded that our participation in this ministry of reconciliation happens right in the middle of life in this world. As things endlessly change around us, the gospel message stays the same. Our call to hold fast to the gospel in our own lives and to shine the gospel light into other's lives stays the same. The main message here is not about working hard for our own sake, as if we can achieve our own salvation, but about bringing that salvation to a world that desperately needs it. This takes work; hard work.

St Paul says it starts with not putting a stumbling block in anyone's path. Don't give people a reason to reject the message out of hand, simply because your own life appears to take God's grace in vain. Instead, St Paul encourages us to cultivate a lifestyle, a set of values, a disposition or approach to life that has the gospel at the centre. Our own experience of reconciliation is what testifies to the gospel. How we then appear to others is quite important.

Taking St Paul as the example, we may be honoured or shamed, with either good or bad reputations. Yet throughout it all, we remain true to Christ, even when treated as impostors. We can be confident that we will be seen for who we are, even though we may often feel others do not fully recognise it. And when we seek God's reconciliation with one another in our often messy and complicated relationships we participate in Christ's sufferings for the world. This is both an incredible privilege and quite a scary thought. To participate in Christ's sufferings, we too will have to die. Not just our final death when our earthly journey is ended, but the daily dying to self that flows out of our baptism into Christ. We may even be disciplined through what is taking place in our lives, yet in Christ, we are not destroyed.

The very act of sharing in the sufferings of Christ as we seek to live out his ministry of reconciliation, and doing so with purity, understanding, patience, kindness, genuine love, and truthful speech, shows people the gospel message is genuine. Not because we have managed to live such good lives, but because God has done a good work in us. It is the Holy Spirit who works in us, who grows good fruit in us, who grows purity, understanding, patience, kindness, genuine love, and truthful speech that then testifies to the validity of the gospel. This list sort of sounds like the fruit that Paul lists in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If people are seeing this fruit in our lives, even amidst situations and circumstances that would normally result in the opposite of these things, then they will be assured that the gospel of Jesus Christ is actually worth believing.

Again, this is not for our sake. We don't benefit. Doing all these things doesn't earn us our salvation. But it does bring glory to God and shows to others that Christ's death on the cross for our sake has made a difference in our lives. This is the power that enabled Paul to endure so much. He knew that the gospel light would shine through. And it takes courage to willingly face humiliation and suffering. We're generally not very good at it. Even in the church, where we know the forgiveness we have in Christ Jesus, we struggle to seek that forgiveness from others. Even when we know we've wronged someone, we so often avoid any position of vulnerability which also means we avoid reconciliation and forgiveness. Not only does that leave us in a broken relationship with the person we've wronged, but it can be the stumbling block that prevents someone else from trusting the gospel message. If it hasn't seemed to make any difference to your life, why should they care? If you can't put aside your pride for the sake of the gospel, why should they?

The good news is the Holy Spirit is still at work in their life too. Jesus the good shepherd is still caring for and tending the flock. There'll be another chance to live out the reconciliation we have because of Jesus. Lots more in fact. Every single time we sin against God or our neighbour we have another chance to show that this ministry of reconciliation is the real thing. And I'm not sure about you, but I know for me that that means lots and lots of opportunities.

We might not have to endure quite as much as St Paul, but we are called to the same attitude of not wanting our own pride, our own needs, our own desires, get in the way of someone else hearing and trusting the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, we pray that the Holy Spirit would continue to work in us, growing in us patience and understanding and kindness and genuine love. And that the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that through Christ God is reconciling the world to himself, would be proclaimed and believed throughout the world, so that many may receive the gift of eternal life to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.