

**“Dedicated to Christ”**  
**2 Corinthians 6:1-13**  
**May 18, 2003**  
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**Text Comment**

v.1 Paul has already said in 5:20 that God makes his appeal to men through him. It is God himself who stands behind the message. It is hard to know precisely what Paul means when he speaks of someone receiving God’s grace in vain. How is *that* possible? Perhaps it is best to think of him appealing here to the Corinthians to stand firm in the grace they have received, just as he once said of himself that he is careful to follow hard after the Lord lest having preached to others he himself be disqualified for the prize.

v.2 That is, God has visited these people with his salvation, and had done so through Paul’s own ministry. Paul’s authority, which is now in dispute in the Corinthian church, remember, was demonstrated by the work God did among them through him.

The “now” drives this thought home. This is the time of God’s favor toward them. This is the time for them to give heed to his summons. A similar thought is the one we find in Isaiah: “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.”

v.4 In the following verses Paul both denies the charges that the false teachers have been making against him and asserts the faithfulness of his ministry, largely by indicating how much he has suffered on behalf of the ministry God gave him to fulfill.

He opens by saying that his personal behavior has not been inconsistent with his message, as we know had been one of the charges made against him. We know very well in our time what damage is done to the credibility of the gospel and the reputation of Christianity when ministers behave shamefully. Paul was scrupulously careful to avoid giving any offense by his manner of life. He did not want to put any obstacle in the way of people believing the message he was bringing to them.

Now, the list of hardships that Paul endured for the sake of the gospel has been called the “apostolic identification card.” This passage is elaborated later in this letter in 11:23ff. In a way this shorter summary prepares the way for the longer, more detailed account Paul gives later.

v.5 The first triplet – troubles, hardships, and distresses – consists of general terms. The second – beatings, imprisonments and riots – are more specific instances of troubles we know Paul suffered from the account of Paul’s ministry that we are given in the NT. The third triplet – hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger – are difficulties more of a voluntary nature, difficulties Paul imposed upon himself for the sake of his work. Hard work may refer to Paul’s practice of supporting himself with a trade while he devoted himself to preaching and hunger refers both to doing without food for the sake of getting his work done and to that fasting by which he trained his soul in godly self-control and

strengthened his prayers by giving up food to demonstrate to God the urgency of his request.

- v.6 Now he turns from sufferings that he endured for the gospel's sake to the virtues of the Christian life. If the false teachers had pointed to Paul's hardships as a sign of his weakness, he replies that his character as a Christian had remained unchanged in defiance of the difficulties of life.
- v.7 "In truthful speech" literally is "in the word of truth" which is better taken to be a reference not to the *way* Paul speaks but *what* he proclaims, the gospel. He preached the gospel, as they well knew, in the power of God.
- v.8 "Genuine, yet regarded as imposters" is the first of seven antitheses that now follow in which the perception is contrasted with the reality, or the worldly judgment with a true spiritual judgment.
- v.13 Paul has demonstrated his affection for his spiritual children in Corinth. All he is asking is that they reciprocate.

This passage we have read is widely regarded as one of the truly beautiful passages in Paul's letters. In its original Greek it is a particularly impressive piece of writing and bears some resemblance to some other famous specimens of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Isocrates, the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Greek orator, said that the most powerful way to be persuasive is to argue from one's own life and experience. [In Witherington, 398] That is what Paul has done here. He has given us, as I mentioned, his apostolic "identification card." And what was that card? His own life, lived faithfully in hardship for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the salvation of others.

Paul here displays, without any artifice, all the devotion, the sincerity, the focused commitment that marked his life as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ and herald of the good news of salvation in him. Everyone is not a minister, as Paul was, but surely this passage challenges and is intended to challenge every serious reader to re-examine his or her commitment to God, to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to renew and rededicate every power, every talent, every moment to the single-minded pursuit of the will and the purpose and the pleasure of God.

Paul says, in another place, that if you wish to be godly, if you wish to be Christ-like, if you wish to be a faithful Christian, you must expect to suffer persecution. The devil and the world will oppose you in many ways. The Christian must be prepared for this. There is a spiritual battle underway in this world. The battlefield is strewn with the wounded and the dead. That is the world in which we live as Christians. Our Savior fought and died on that battlefield and told us before he left the world that we would have to fight his battles after him. And it isn't only the devil and the world ranged against the kingdom of God. No it is worse than that. The enemy is within ourselves. We must deal with this fifth column also and always. Our flesh, our sinful nature, must be brought to heel and that requires that we ourselves impose a strict discipline upon our life in different ways.

In other words, the work of serving the Lord is a difficult one and will require a determined perseverance. All of this Paul describes in his own case and no Christian can hear that description without immediately realizing how true it ought to be of himself, how much she ought to be able to say the same things about herself. No true follower of Jesus Christ wants to reach the end of his pilgrimage unable to say that he has fought his Master's battles and suffered for his sake.

You remember, perhaps, Amy Carmichael's poem:

Has Thou no scar?  
 No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?  
 I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,  
 I hear them hail thy bright, ascendant star,  
 Hast thou no scar?

Has thou no wound?  
 Yet I was wounded by the archers, spent,  
 Leaned me against a tree to die; and rent  
 By ravening beasts that compassed me, I swooned:  
 Hast thou no wound?

No wound? No scar?  
 Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,  
 And pierced are the feet that follow me;  
 But thine are whole: can he have followed far  
 Who has no wound nor scar?

What follower of Christ, what person with Christian blood in his veins, does not immediately understand the logic of that poem and does not feel the force of its question and does not wish to be able to answer it boldly as Paul did.

We know without having to be told that if we are strangers to the reproach of Christ, if we have not been often exhausted by the battle to control our own sinful hearts and to resist the devil and the world, if we do not have a sense that we are living our lives in the thick of a battle, if we cannot point to our scars obtained in combat, there is something very wrong with us. Jesus said that we must be willing to die daily and must be ready to take up our cross to follow him. And he said that not because it is theoretically true, but because that must be the daily lot of every true Christian. So, if we are strangers to real spiritual combat, struggle, and exertions in the face of difficulties, we must ask if the cross of Christ has lost its power within us. Christ and his cross are never far apart and the absence of the cross may be warning us to seek an absent Christ. [Moody Stuart, *The Three Marys*, 275]

If there is anything that a reading of church history will do for the interested Christian it is that it will convince him that the more faithful a Christian is, the more difficulties accumulate in his life and the more burdens he chooses to lay upon himself for Christ's sake. Find me anywhere in the Christian past a great man or a great woman who went to heaven in an easy way. We do not find

that man or woman in the Bible. Rather the Bible is full of what one has called “faith’s grim heredity.” From Abraham and the patriarchs, from Moses to the Judges, from David to the prophets of Israel, the story is the same: beaten, yet not killed, sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, poor, yet making many rich, having nothing and yet possessing everything, in great endurance, in troubles, hardships and distresses. And the story is the same in church history since: from the church fathers and the martyrs to the great preachers; from the reformers to the missionaries; from the devout who lived their lives in anonymity to the famous and influential Christians whose lives were known to many.

Speaking both of the private battles that had to be fought within for Jesus’ sake and the obstacles that had to be overcome without, could not everyone of them repeat Matthew Arnold’s lines with far better reason than Arnold himself,

But now in blood and battles was my youth  
And full of blood and battles is my age,  
And I shall never end this life of blood.

John Geree published in 1646 his book, *The Character of an Old English Puritan or Nonconformist*. In that book he described the Puritan this way:

“His whole life he accounted a warfare, wherein Christ was his  
Captain; his arms, praises and tears. The Crosse his banner and his  
Word [or motto] ‘Vincit qui patitur.’”

Surely that is to be a fair account of *any* Christian’s life, English puritan or no. And the amazing and wonderful thing about this is that Christians who give themselves to the battle, to the difficulties – both those others impose upon them and those they impose upon themselves for the sake of Christ – do not resent the struggle or the hardship, but bind it to them as a badge of honor. It is the way their Savior went and it is only right that they should travel the same way; it is the way they demonstrate their loyalty to him, by fighting his battles; and it is the only way that they can live a life they know is pleasing to him, for that life of purity and love does not come, has never come without struggle and the hardest conceivable work. Besides, it is in the battle, Paul would say, it is in the hardships undertaken out of loyalty to Christ, that we see him more clearly, we find him nearer to us, we catch a sight of the glory that is to come. Those who live behind the lines remain unwounded, but they never experience life to its full the way the man or woman does who lives every day between heaven and hell.

Some of you may remember from your school days the poems of Robert Service, the poet of Alaska in the days of the frontier. Service was famous for his depiction of nature, red in tooth and claw, such as one found it in Alaska in those days. And in his poems he described with a kind of brutality what Alaska required of those who would settle there and tame its land. In his poem, *The Law of the Yukon*, we find these lines.

Send not your foolish and feeble; send me your strong and your sane,  
Strong for the red-rage of battle; sane for I harry them sore.  
Send me men girt for the combat, men who are grit to the core,

Swift as the panther in triumph, fierce as the bear in defeat,  
 Sired of a bulldog parent, steeled in the furnace of heat...  
 And I wait for the men who will win me – and I will not be won in a  
 Day,  
 And I will not be won by weaklings, subtle and suave and mild,  
 But by men with the hearts of Vikings and the simple faith of a child,  
 Desperate, strong and resistless, unthrottled by fear or defeat,  
 Them I will gild with my treasure, them will I glut with my meat.

In his *Journals*, the young Jim Elliot copied out those lines from Service's poem and then added his own conclusion: "Teach me to count the cost, O God, most expensively won!"

This too is a biblical way of thinking about the kingdom of God and about the Christian life. Soldiers fighting for their King and Captain, fighting a bloody battle and displaying strength, courage, and honor no matter the heat of battle, no matter the strength of the foe, no matter how exhausted the soldier himself.

And this is true – this Robert Service sort of courage and daring and dash – this is true of Christians whether they are young men or old women, whether they live their Christians lives in public or almost entirely in private, whether their battles are fought in the world or within their own souls, whether the obstacles and difficulties and hardships are largely those imposed upon them by others or by themselves in hopes of presenting to their Lord and Savior a pure heart and a godly life every day.

And the reason is that every Christian knows that it is precisely *this* life, this life of battle and struggle and hard work and the endurance of difficulty *for the sake of serving Christ, for the sake of pleasing him, for the sake of doing his will and showing your love and thanksgiving to him*, that is the very best use of one's time in this world. *And, what is more*, Jesus took pains to promise his people, time and again, that he would be with them in that battle, he would honor them in those hardships – "he who honors me, I will honor" – and he said that in particular reference to those who would do the difficult thing to serve him. And, if Christ is willing to help us endure the hardships, if he stands ready to show himself especially to those who serve him in difficulty, if he has promised to single out for special attention those whose devotion to him is proved by their endurance in the battle for what matters to God, then why would we not seek those greater things that Christ has promised to those who fight. Why live in this world a life with so much less of Christ because we were unwilling to fight his battles. Why live without Christ near when he promises to draw near to those who serve him and nearer still to those who serve him in the face of difficulty.

Joseph Conrad, the American novelist, in his book *The Mirror of the Sea* quotes from a letter of Sir Robert Stopford, one of Horatio Nelson's captains, who commanded one of the ships with which Nelson chased to the West Indies an enemy fleet nearly double in size. Describing the desperate hardships of that daring adventure, Stopford wrote, "We are half-starved, and otherwise inconvenienced by being so long out of port. But our reward is – *we are with Nelson!* How much more should any Christian be able to say, yes, my life is difficult in many ways; I have even made it more difficult by laying myself under the obligation to offer my heart and life

to the Lord Jesus every day, clean and ready, *but, my reward is, I am with Christ!* [James Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 144]

That was Paul's mind. He is not at all regretting the troubles he has endured. He would not have it any other way. He is God's fellow-worker and that, *that* is what determines the goodness and happiness and fruitfulness of his life. He would far, far rather be serving God in troubles than failing God in ease. And, as Christ proved to him countless times, he knew very well he got more of God and more of Christ in the troubles he endured for the gospel's sake and for his own godliness' sake than he ever would have got with a life of greater ease and comfort.

In one of his books, Dr. J.I. Packer relates an incident from his own experience.

“I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. ‘But it doesn't matter,’ he said at length, ‘for I've known God and they haven't.’” [*Knowing God*, 24]

Paul might have said the very same thing. “The false teachers have had an easier life, I admit. Their doctrine has cost them little and their way of ministry has been the way of human applause, but here is the difference. I've known Christ, and they haven't. Christ has been near to me and shown himself to me a hundred times and they know nothing of that. I'll take Christ with troubles any day over ease without the Lord Jesus.”

So, brothers and sisters, let us take this text to heart. If you ask, as a real Christian will always ask: “why has my Christian faith not made more of a vital difference to me?” The answer may well be: because you have not suffered enough for it! Why has Christ not shown himself more powerfully and gloriously to me? The answer may well be: because he shows himself most wonderfully to those who suffer, fight, and struggle for him. Whether the struggle is with those who do not believe or with your own sinful heart and flesh, Christians through the ages will all tell you the same thing: as Samuel Rutherford put it, “a Christ bought with crosses is the sweetest Christ of all!”

And lest you think that you cannot do it, that the Lord Jesus is asking too much of you. Believe his Word. Exercise your faith. Lose your life for him and you will find it. As Rutherford again put it:

“Those who can take the crabbed tree of the cross handsomely upon their backs and fasten it on cannily shall find it such a burden as its wings are to a bird or its sails to a ship.” [Letter LXIX]

This passage cannot but pose the question to everyone of us: What is *our* identification card? Let us not rest, not a one of us, until it is clear that our identification card, the card we will hand in when asked for our identification at the gate of heaven, is the evidence that we have fought our Master's battles and have served him come wind, come weather.