

June 20, 2021

LIVING IN THIS AGE WHILE PARTAKING OF THE AGE TO COME

2 Corinthians 6:3-13

(14 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

In 1974 G. E. Ladd wrote a book titled, *The Presence of the Future*. I always thought that was one of the best titles for a book. And what he argued for is the very thing we saw in our text last week, namely, that through the work of Christ and his pouring out of the Holy Spirit, we've been given a taste now (in the present) of what is to come (in the future). We know that one day the whole creation will be made new, but now we already get to experience what it's like to be made new, since we've been given eternal life through Christ. We know that one day sin will be no more, but we get to experience now what it's like not to be enslaved to sin as the world is. And we could go on with other examples. But what we can affirm is the truth in the title of Ladd's book. As believers, we're getting to experience a taste of the future right now in the present.

And yet, as exciting as that may be, we still live in this age where Satan is like a lion seeking whom he may devour, sin destroys everything it touches, and death is lurking at every corner. Not only that, but Jesus was very clear about the fact that if the world hated him, then it will hate his followers as well. He even pictured our mission as being sent out into the world as sheep in the midst of wolves, which (as I've noted before), isn't a pretty sight if we understand what those two animals coming into contact looks like. So although we're getting a taste of the age to come, we still live in this age with our bodies wasting away, where we experience persecution, and where our obedience to Christ may well cost us our very lives.

How then do we navigate these waters? How do we go through this life when we know the glory of the age to come (and have already been given a taste of) and we know the glorious message of the gospel, and yet our experience in the world can be like that of sheep running off toward a pack of wolves? Thankfully Paul gives us insight toward answering this question in 2 Corinthians 6:3-13. And he does it by telling us what he does as a minister of glory (to borrow Paul's earlier phrase), living in an age where Satan, sin, and death are ravaging. Therefore, this morning I want to show you what Paul says in one statement, which I'll allow to serve as a heading for a few things Paul fleshes out in this text. In a word, we put no obstacles in front of the gospel but commend it with our lives.

We put no obstacles in front of the gospel but commend it with our lives

Throughout this letter, Paul has held up before the Corinthians the glorious ministry we have to be able to declare the good news to people and see the Lord remove the veil from their minds and hearts so that they see the glory of Christ and believe. He's noted that he is bold in speaking the gospel (3:12), believes in the surpassing power of the gospel (4:7), and endures in hope of the gospel (4:16). But in 6:3-4 he also mentions that he makes sure to do nothing to put an obstacle in front of the gospel, but rather wants to commend it with his life. Paul writes, "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.” In other words, Paul doesn’t want there to be anything about who he is or how he lives his life to discredit the message that he is preaching. And this makes sense, doesn’t it? After all, how many times have unbelievers decided the gospel must not be worth listening to because they heard of some television preacher who was exposed as a charlatan or because they knew individuals who profess faith, remain members of local churches, and yet are pursuing godlessness in their lives? Those are major obstacles to the gospel, and Paul wants his life and ministry to provide no obstacle to hearing and believing. Rather, Paul wants to commend himself as an example to the Corinthians of how we live in order to commend the gospel before the world. What is Paul doing specifically in order to achieve this aim? He mentions a number of different things in these verses. Let’s take them one at a time, which I’ll frame in the first person for us.

A. We endure through hardships

The first thing Paul mentions in the list he begins in verse 4 is endurance in hardships. He writes, “We commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (vv. 4-5). In other words, it doesn’t matter what comes Paul’s way, he’s going to keep enduring. Or, to use Paul’s language earlier in this letter, he’s not going to lose heart but is going to press on in good courage.

Now, this may not be something that we think of in terms of commending the gospel to others instead of putting obstacles in front of it, but when we endure through hardships, we’re testifying to the glory of Christ and his gospel. I mean, consider what Paul puts in this list. He’s faced all kinds of afflictions, beatings, imprisonments, times of hunger, etc., and he keeps pressing on. It would be impossible for someone to claim that Paul doesn’t believe what he’s preaching or doesn’t see Jesus Christ as worth following. And the reason why is because he keeps enduring through every hardship to make sure that the gospel is being honored and Christ is being exalted.

Our endurance in hardship so obviously commends the glory of Christ to others that this was Satan’s line of attack against Job. He thought that if God would bring hardship into his life and Job didn’t endure, then it would discredit how glorious and valuable God is. However, what actually happened is Job *did* endure, and his life testified that there is nothing more valuable than what we have in our Lord. We endure in hardships, and it commends Christ to others.

But before we move on from this, I want to acknowledge that in saying this, I’m not wanting to make light of hardships as if endurance is simple and easy. The hardships in Paul’s list are great, and I know a number of things that you all have gone through and are going through that you could add to this list, and I hate that you’re suffering these things. You’ve suffered through illness, a child’s rebellion, an unbelieving spouse, and so many other things for what can no doubt feel like forever. And I’ve prayed for you that the Lord would be healing, relief, and salvation. We have prayed for you and wept for you. In other words, I know that what we’re seeing here isn’t easy. So I just want to add one little piece today that I pray will strengthen you and give you another layer of grace to apply in the midst of your hardships. As you endure in this

and keep pursuing Christ, don't think your Father is allowing this to go to waste. You are commending our Lord and his gospel in a glorious, undeniable way. Have no doubt about that, and keep pressing on. That's the first way we put no obstacle before the gospel but rather commend it; we endure in hardships.

B. We walk in purity, holiness, and the power of the Spirit

Paul moves on in verses 6-7a, writing, "By purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left." You can see from the list that he's describing what characterizes the life of a believer who is walking in purity, holiness, and the power of the Spirit. I want to start with the last of these—the power of the Spirit. Paul mentions the Holy Spirit explicitly at a place where we may not expect him. After noting patience, and kindness, and before mentioning love, he writes, "The Holy Spirit." But I think the reason he does this is because he's reminding us that the one who walks in purity and holiness does so only by the power of the Holy Spirit. Love, patience, and kindness are listed in the Scripture as the fruit of the Spirit, after all. And it's the Spirit's work in us which changes our desires and moves us to obey. Therefore, as those indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we have been empowered to live lives of holiness and purity. We've been empowered to live selfless lives of love. By the power of the Spirit, we can pursue love, praying every day that the Lord would empower and gift us by the Holy Spirit with gifts to be able to edify and minister to one another. We've been given power to walk in purity as an example to others.

I think there is a temptation to think that the greatest threat to the church is persecution. We're always geared up for it, upset when our liberties are removed, and the like. And we *should* be bothered by these things. But the gospel will be fine in persecution. Christ will be commended to the world as the church endures in days of persecution. But the greater threat by far to the church and the greater damage done to the honor of Christ is when the people of God fail to live in purity and holiness and love. When we fight tooth and nail for our rights and then happily go and expose ourselves on Netflix to all manner of impurity and sensuality, we may think we're fighting for the gospel, but we're testifying that Christ isn't worth obeying. I've mentioned before, but I think the great way that believers will stand out in our day will be in our refusal to chase after sexual immorality in all its forms. Refusing to view pornography and walking in purity with the person you're dating will do more to commend the gospel than a hundred arguments you make on Twitter or Facebook intellectually defending the gospel. Assuming the best of one another and bearing offenses from one another will speak more loudly to the world than proving ourselves right on a matter via social media. Lives of holiness, purity, and love, Paul tells us, are "weapons of righteousness."

The same is true when we conduct ourselves in kindness, patience, genuine love, and truthful speech. This is how we advertise to the world that we are followers of Christ. And lest our response be that we can't help giving in a bit here or there to walking after the patterns of the world, Romans 6 tells us that we can. We have the Spirit of God.

So let's ask God for his grace and set our minds to walk in a way where we're characterized by patience, kindness, and love; where we're pursuing purity and holiness; and where the power of the Holy Spirit is evident in our lives. And as we do so we will provide no obstacle to but rather commend the gospel.

C. We remain constant during the highs and lows

In verse 8 Paul adds these two phrases: "Through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise." Now, in light of what we've seen in this list so far with things like beatings, sleepless nights, and the like, wouldn't you expect Paul to say, "Through dishonor and slander?" But he doesn't. He mentions *honor* and dishonor, slander and *praise*. Why? What's he saying? It seems that Paul is saying that his life and pursuits and character are not affected whether he's going through highs or lows. If he's honored or dishonored, it matters not to Paul's pursuit. If he's slandered or praised, he's still seeking to honor Jesus Christ.

And Paul writes of these things because both ends of the spectrum can be a threat to us. Obviously if we receive dishonor and slander then it can provide a temptation to want to please man in order to escape his attacks. After all, no one especially enjoys being dishonored or slandered. But receiving honor and praise from others could have the same effect. Just as we can be tempted to alter what we do to avoid the pain of slander and dishonor, we can alter what we do to see the pleasure of receiving honor and praise. Paul, however, notes that through both ends of the spectrum, he is about the same thing—living a life that puts no obstacle in front of the gospel and commends Christ. Nothing deters him from this.

Therefore, one thing that we need to think through is how to process the ups and downs of life. How do we approach for example praise and slander both in a way that we are not thrown off course by either? And I think the answer is that we filter all things through the goal of knowing and loving Christ more. If I receive praise in pursuit of loving Christ more, then I need to thank God for the encouragement he is giving in that pursuit, recognizing that every good and perfect gift comes from above, and not be deterred toward simply chasing after what might bring us honor and praise. And so, in those moments, we can thank God for his undeserved kindness to us and then focus on pleasing him more. Similarly, when we are slandered, Jesus tells us to rejoice for great is our reward in heaven, for they reviled and persecuted the prophets before us. Do you see? In all circumstances we can remain constant in our pursuit of knowing and loving Christ more, and as we do so, we'll be a testimony to the value of our Lord.

D. We evaluate everything in light of eternity

We've spoken about this before in this letter of 2 Corinthians because Paul has explicitly commanded us to set our minds on those things which are unseen and eternal rather than those which are seen and transient, which we can sum up as viewing everything in light of eternity. Now, he shows us what that actually looks like in verses 8-10. He writes, "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as

punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.”

You can see what Paul is doing here in each of these realities he lists. He is saying that on the one hand, this is happening, but on the other hand, he’s telling us what he knows is true. Or, we might say, on the one hand this is how things look, but from the perspective of the Lord this is what is real. People may say things about him, but he knows what is true. He may be disregarded by many, but he is treasured by God. He may suffer and die but he’s being renewed and will live. He may be discouraged and downcast but rejoices in what is eternal. He may lose all, but he has everything in Christ. This is another way we commend the gospel, by right thinking. That is we commend the gospel by having an eternal perspective.

It is a powerful testimony to see someone losing everything in this world and testify that they have all they need in Christ. It is powerful to watch someone falsely accused or slandered and see them walk in peace, knowing what is true. It is beyond powerful to watch someone ignored but have joyful peace in knowing they are known and treasured by God. And, brothers and sisters, you may not have the opportunity to persevere in the midst of beatings, imprisonments, and riots, but you will have the opportunity to judge every incident in your life in light of the perspective of eternity every day. Let us seek the Lord’s grace to have strength to do this very thing.

E. We love our brothers and sisters in Christ and are vulnerable with them

Paul ends this section by asking the Corinthians to open their hearts toward him. He writes, “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also” (vv. 11-13). What’s easy to see is that Paul is not guarded with his affections. Sometimes we want to protect ourselves from the potential of hurt, and so we reserve our affections. We try to be measured in our love and measured in giving ourselves over to others because if they choose not to love us, the thought is that the hurt will not be as great. Moreover, others may do that in regard to us as well. Consequently, you can form an entire community of believers who are all reserved in their affections in an attempt to protect and guard their hearts from the risk of others not loving in return. But this isn’t what Paul models.

He perceives that the Corinthians have not opened their hearts toward him as he desires. Their affections for him are lacking. But far from pulling back his own affections or shutting down his heart in protection-mode, Paul proclaims that his heart is wide open toward the Corinthians. His affections are unbridled. He is being as vulnerable as possible, and he asks them to respond in turn.

This is a picture of what the church is to be. Jesus said that we will be known as his disciples by our love for one another. Moreover, we’re a people who know the gospel is our only hope. In other words, we’re a people who know we deserve nothing but God’s judgment and are who we are by his grace. Therefore, there need not be fear in the church. All of us are lacking. All of us

are full of weaknesses. All of us have needs. This is why Ray Ortlund says, “You can either be known or you can be impressive. But you can’t be both.” He’s right. We’re all weak and broken and need God’s grace. No one has it all together, and if you think so, you don’t know them. So let others know and see your deficiencies, open your heart to them, and watch them open their hearts to you, and let’s be a community who loves one another with wide-open hearts and lives.

And this is what is so great about this. If we do this one well, then it will aid us in all the others. When I’m vulnerable, loving, and allowing others to love me, then I’ll be helped in my aim to endure during hardships. Walking in the Spirit and in holiness and purity—which stem from love—will come more naturally. I’ll be strengthened by your love to walk faithfully in highs and lows. Your love will remind me of what is so glorious about eternity so that I can evaluate this present age in light of what’s to come. As a people who know the gospel, let’s open our hearts wide toward one another, be vulnerable, and love one another so that the world will know we’re followers of Jesus and he’ll be commended to them by how we live.

How do we live in this time as we’re getting a taste of the age to come and yet still stand squarely in this age? We live in a way that puts obstacles in front of the gospel but in a way that commends it. We endure, pursue holiness, walk in consistency, fix our eyes on eternity, and walk in vulnerability and love with our brothers and sisters. And in all of this we rest in the work of Jesus who lived, died, and was raised for us. Let’s rest in his work now as we come to the table. Amen.