

1,8,26 2 Cor. 6:1-13, Receiving the Grace and Gift of God

Let's begin by reading the first two verses in 2 Cor. 6;

We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Paul begins this chapter by reminding them that even though he is an apostle, all of them (and all of us) are 'co-laborers' with Christ working toward a very specific goal. The Lord is in the process, throughout this Age, of what Paul describes in Eph. 4:12-16 (I'm going to paraphrase this to bring out it's connection to our passage in 2 Cor. 6);

The goal is the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, which is the spiritual building up and strengthening of the body of Christ, until we reach maturity – the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we should no longer remain children, but may grow up in all things . . . working together through what every member supplies – the working which every part does to cause the growth of the body, strengthened through mutual love for one another.

There are no "dispensable" members in the Church. "The eye cannot say to hand, I have no need of you . . ." (1 Cor. 12:21). The main responsibility falls on those in leadership, as shown in Eph. 4:11-12, but it is always a huge mistake when leadership is considered the only essential workers in this process of getting all of us to maturity.

I realize that churches are now structured in a way that tends to separate those considered the "real ministers" from the spectators who watch them do their thing. But from the beginning, because of the Holy Spirit's structuring of the assemblies, everyone in any fellowship was both honored, involved and seen as essential in reaching the goal the Lord has for us.

I know that as we look back over our lives, we would probably admit that we have gained a great deal from solid teachers, but if we're being completely honest, we would also have to admit that some of the believers we've known, who were *not* on stage, contributed true spiritual life to us in some way.

Like Paul also said in 1 Cor. 12:23; "Those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor . . ." But only if we understand and realize their true value in what the Lord is trying to accomplish. Increasing in the knowledge of God's Word

is absolutely essential for spiritual advance, but in the end, it will be the transformation of the life, not just the renewing of our behavior, that brings us to spiritual maturity; and it's not knowledge alone that makes that happen. The following verses have slightly different wording, but the message is the same;

Matt. 10:42; Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.

Mk. 9:41; Truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

The Lord both honors and rewards any believer who shows love in some way to another believer when that act of love is most needed. And also . . .

(Matt. 19:29-30) Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

I am certain that many Christians we may have thought of as "in the background" at best, will be given greater positions of authority and honor in God's kingdom than many of the most popular or famous Christians of their generation – for two reasons.

- 1) God is looking more at the disciple's personal commitment to Christ than at the attention he receives.
- 2) Throughout the scripture, the Lord appears to exalt the humble and disregard the those who are highly esteemed among men.

Anyone who is committed to giving to others what God has given them, by giftedness or resources or whatever, no matter how small it may be in the eyes of Man, will be seen as immensely precious and important to the Lord.

(Lk. 21:1-4) He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and He saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites. So, He said, "Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had."

We look at the *amount* given; God looks at the heart of the one *doing* the giving. He doesn't measure Christian service the way the world (or even the contemporary church) measures it.

This principle even applies to all we've learned over the years about the overcomers; about reigning with Christ.

(Matt. 25:20-23) He who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

The servant who was faithful with two talents received the same promise as the one who had five talents, "You have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things." The offer of the throne was given on the basis of faithfulness, not on the size of the service or ministry.

This is what I mean when I talk about the shock many will experience when they discover the favor of man was much less important than the favor of God. And any child of God, regardless of how well-known they are here, is very well known by the eyes of Him Who sees, and records, every act of kindness for what it is.

So, never make the mistake of comparing yourself with anyone. All the Lord is looking for is faithfulness to what He asks us to do, however insignificant what we are doing may seem to us. We'll see more on this when we get to 2 Cor. 10, but in that chapter (vs's 12 & 13) Paul wrote;

For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us.

When Paul wrote that he was trying to spare us a great deal of pain through introspection. Each one of us has a definite "limit" to the sphere of influence God has planned for us. To go beyond that "limited sphere" is just as wrong as failing to do anything. The bottom-line is being open to God's will and avoid worrying about how what you are doing compares to what you see others doing.

One other thing we need to hang onto is that our "final exam" is based *only* on the issue of our response to what God has asked of us. If we do that, and nothing more, that's 100% success.

Of course, nobody does *everything* God has asked because we all fail numerous times throughout our lives. So, again, it's more important to the Lord that we are willing to do His will and that we intend to do so to the extent that our personal limitations allow, than that we (quote) "accomplish great things for God".

He said His yoke is easy and His burden is light – neither of those would be true if we were meant to carry guilt and an overwhelming burden of failure around all the time. We do what we can, and we trust Him with the outcome. He's the Author and Finisher of our faith. It has always been, and always will be, a heart issue, not an 'outward success measured by Man' issue'.

By adding, "Now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation", Paul is drawing out attention to the fact that we live and act based on the realization of the grace God has given us.

Paul is actually going to expand on the theme of "the least will be the greatest" in the next few verses by using the language of paradoxes.

I won't review all of them now, but Paul was big on using what seem like contradictions to explain the Christian life. I think it's his way of expressing what we see in Isa. 55:8-9;

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways", declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Neither Isaiah nor Paul are saying that we can't know God's ways; they're saying that we can't understand His ways if we use human logic or "the ways of Man" to try and understand why and how God does what He does.

One example we've looked at numerous times is Paul's thorn in the flesh; when Paul says that God's strength is perfected in our weakness, human thinking would interpret that as, "God will replace our weakness with His strength". But the reality is, God leaves our weakness in full operation; weakness is normally all we experience when God is perfecting His strength in us. That makes no sense humanly speaking. But a spiritually renewed mind can see not only how that works, but why it has to be that way.

Learning and understanding God's ways with His people is one of the biggest challenges a Christian faces as he tries to grow in His knowledge of Christ. Because, as we saw in Isaiah, God's ways are the opposite of what seems reasonable or rational to us. We have an immense amount of things we have to unlearn before we can learn the Truth.

Fortunately, God is patient. But as I'm sure you all realize, this isn't something we can learn academically. To have lights flash in our minds about what the ways of God mean in real life requires that we are consistently taken into personal circumstances that provide life experiences of God's ways as they operate in contrast to Man's ways.

People will think we are insane and they won't understand a word we're saying when we try to explain things like this, which, as we saw when we studied John, is exactly what people thought about Christ – both in regard to His teaching as well as His actions.

Now, let's look at Paul's paradoxes in vs's 3 to 10. First, he lays a foundation for what he's going to say by telling the Corinthians that his motive behind all of this is to (quote) "... give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed." People may not understand him, but he wants to make sure they have nothing valid to hold against him. It was crucial to Paul, and would be to us also, that when people find out we are Christians, they can't start pointing to all the inconsistencies in our lives that would bring our alleged commitment to Christ into question. "You say you're a Christian, so why do you . . .?" If they have a list, hopefully it will be short. Or, at least, we will be honest, transparent and apologetic. Pretense of personal perfection is never a good idea if we want people to believe our message.

Here's Ironside's take on this;

Paul must be careful of his own personal behavior that he may not stumble another. "Giving no offence in anything." By the term offence he does not mean hurting people's feelings. It is impossible for any servant of Christ to behave himself so as never to hurt the feelings of someone. It is impossible to so speak, to so act that one can forever be free from hurting people's feelings. Some people carry their feelings on their sleeves all the time. If you do not shake hands with them, you probably intended to slight them. If you do, you hurt them, forgetting they have rheumatism. If you stop to speak with them, you are interrupting them. If you do not, you must think you are superior to them. If you write them a letter, they are sure you want to get their money. If you do not, you are neglecting them. If you visit them, you are bothering them. If you do not, it shows you have no interest in the flock. It is impossible to please everyone, but when the apostle says, "Giving no offence," he means behaving yourself in a way that no one can point to you and say, "That man's ways are such that I lose confidence in the salvation that he professes."

So, Paul gets specific on what it has meant to him to stay faithful to Christ, and how that faithfulness has been interpreted by those around him.

(2 Cor. 6:4-7) In all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fasting; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.

The first few verses are simply a statement of his experiences in following Christ; but in vs's 8-10 he shows how those experiences have been interpreted by others.

By honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

What I'm hoping we are seeing in this is that following the Lord is going to involve an immense amount of opposition from the enemy and he will normally use people to come against us and try to stop us, or at least destroy our testimony.

The greater our commitment to stay true to our Lord; the greater will be the opposition against us from the principalities and powers we wrestle with.

And as to the “paradoxical” nature of this life, we are likely to see a constant contrast between that which is true about us versus that which is not true, but reported and spread by others as being the *real* truth about us.

So, we see honor vs. dishonor, evil report vs. good report – we’re called deceivers, but we aren’t. We may be unknown among the popular, but we are well-known to the Lord and to our enemy. We are seen as dying, but in reality we are becoming more alive spiritually all the time; we are seen as judged, but not unto death; we experience both sorrow and joy; and poverty materially, but we are a source of spiritual wealth to others; and we are seen as having nothing, but in God’s eyes, we possess all things in Christ.

We have nothing that impresses the world or a Christianity that uses the world’s standards of value and success, but we actually possess something that neither the world nor the Laodicean church can understand – we have true spiritual life in Christ and that life has eternal value in God’s eyes.

If we can ever get these truths Paul is trying to communicate to become not only what we believe, but also the way we see life itself, then Paul’s paradoxes will make sense.

We probably aren't too excited about ". . . in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fasting, etc."; but we need to realize that Paul is explaining what much of life in Christ implies for a genuinely committed disciple. Those things make us the kind of people, by both character and understanding, that are able to add the rest of what Paul includes in this life; ". . . always rejoicing; making many rich; and possessing all things."

We can't have one without the other. As we've seen in Heb. 12, the "chastening" which feels grievous at the time, leads to the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who endure it for the sake of our testimony in Christ.

Ok, up to now, this has been pretty much just my thoughts on these things and I am aware of a large number of teachers and authors that have gone much deeper and further in understanding what we've been looking at. So, for the next few minutes, I'm going to quote some of them to add some depth to what we've seen so far.

We know the goal the Lord has in mind for what He takes us through; we also know how difficult it can be. So, I want to reemphasize the need on our part to do something that will help ensure we go as far as possible in our spiritual growth. The Lord said that to be His disciples we would need to pick up our cross daily and follow Him. That simply means taking a "not my will, but thy will" mindset each morning and allowing the Lord to shape our lives as He determines would be the best way to establish and strengthen us, and to glorify Him. The following author's comments expound on this;

The Lord desires us to go on. Sometimes going on means loneliness in going on where others will not go with us. That means a price is bound up with obedience. It may mean a big break, a big change. It is the challenge of whether we are adjustable before the Lord. The measure of our adjustability is the evidence and measure of our commitment to the Lord. When that surrender is there, the Lord is able to bring us on into all His thought. Let us remember always that we shall never get to a place while we are here where there is not some higher level and some greater fullness of Christ. There will always be yet another step, and another after that, higher on. Let us have our hearts set upon reaching all. He takes us a step at a time, and He does not want us to take six steps at a bound, or to contemplate six steps at a time. He shows us our next step, and that is all we have to be concerned about now. The other steps will come at the right time. Every step prepares us for the next.

Very often our lives are like mountain climbing. You see from below to a certain height, and that seems to be the top, and you make for it. And when you get to it, you see a little

further on that there is another top. You think that must be the very top, and so you make for that, and when you get to it there is something still further. You never do seem to get to the top. But we *will* arrive at last. The Lord hides the other things and says: "Now, that is your next step; obey that and fuller revelation will come after that." We see that He brought us by stages, and today we are grateful for the price paid and the greater fullness of revelation. Let us ask the Lord to put into us the spirit of His servant, Paul: "Not that I have already obtained it... but one thing I do... I press on...."

As I've said many times (and as we've seen Paul also say many times), this is not easy. We're at war and we will *be* at war until we lay down our weapons in heaven. But it is in the actions of war that we become soldiers with strength and courage we would never have without what we've been through.

I've wanted to back out a million times, and if it was totally up to me, I'm sure I would have; but somehow, I'm still here.

So, I did some research on different author's opinions on this and I greatly appreciated Spark's comments because his own life demonstrated never giving up in spite of extreme pressure against him coming from many angles. His comments are based on Gal. 5:7 which says, "You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" Here's what he wrote;

Something had broken in and interrupted their running in the spiritual race. This was extremely serious and disturbed Paul to the depths of his being. It seems that in the case of the Galatians it was again the natural man, but this time in the realm of natural emotions. They seem to have been of that temperamental constitution which corresponds to Christ's words in the parable about seed falling into shallow soil. The seed was received quickly and earnestly, but did not go on to produce a harvest. There are some people who make an enthusiastic start and make quite a stir about it, but then do not go steadily on. These Galatians were like that; they made a tremendous response; they loudly proclaimed their devotion; and then they dropped out of the race. Why? Because they lived on their emotions, on their feelings, and these were changeable. This may well be a matter of temperament, but in fact something of such a characteristic can be found in most of us. We respond to an appeal, come under the power of a great emotion, and then slack off. In the words of the Lord Jesus: "When tribulation or persecution arises... he is offended" (Matthew 13:21).

Clearly, then, if you and I are going to persevere to the end we must have a greater power than that of our natural emotional life. Our feelings come and go. They may be strong at

times but they can also grow very weak. If we do not know something of the mighty grip of Christ's love, we will never go right through to the end of this strenuous race. "You were running well: who did hinder you?" The answer is, "You ran in the strength of your own emotions, you ran as your enthusiastic response to God's call because it affected your feelings for the time." The letter to the Galatians is devoted to emphasizing the place of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, for He alone can supply the necessary energy of love for our Lord that enables us to go on.

I wanted to share that because it also shows that there is not an expectation that we *will* "run well" because of our natural strength, feelings or determination. Those things can waver and even fail. The Lord supplies endurance to faith, and He perfects His strength *in* our weakness. He asks only that we quietly trust Him and not give up.

Now, in verses 11-13 Paul seems to stain his paper with tears again. I'll read this, drawing out the emphasis in the original;

Oh, my dear Corinthians! We have opened ourselves freely to you, our heart is *wide* open. There is no lack of room for you in *our* hearts, but you lack room in *your own affections* for us. By way of fair return then, do this for me—I speak as to my beloved children—open wide your hearts also to us.

We have to never forget that in Paul, we are seeing the heart of Christ. If the Lord Himself wrote a letter to us, what I just read would be the spirit behind everything He said to us.

This has been from the beginning – in God's creation of us, His greatest desire was that our relationship with Him would be a mutual exchange of deep love and transparency. He has revealed Himself to us in Christ and asks that we return the openness. God was heartbroken when Adam fell. The first thing He did was walk throughout the garden saying, "Adam, where are you?" Adam was ashamed, so he hid; but God wanted to immediately restore the lost relationship and through the blood of animals, He covered Adam and Eve's nakedness with the skins of those that were slain as a picture of the Cross – because as we're told in Rev. 13:8; "(The) Lamb (was) slain from the foundation of the world". God knew that the relationship would be lost, and that it's recovery would cost Him the life of His Son, but Man had to be created with the freedom and ability to choose, and the Cross was the price the Lord was willing to pay.

(Matt. 13:45-46) The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“All He had” was given for the express purpose of having us with Him, those God sees as a “pearl of great price”. There is nothing in all creation more precious to the Lord than His children.

For those of you who have children, think of how you feel about them. Now, multiply that by an infinite number and you will have a glimpse of God’s love for us.

Paul’s desire was to have the Corinthians open their hearts to him, as he had to them, and this was also characteristic of God’s revelation of Himself in Christ. Here’s something I found by Andrew Murray that ties this together;

(1 Jn. 4:8) “God is love . . .” What does that mean? It is the very nature and being of God to delight in communicating Himself. God has no selfishness; God keeps nothing to Himself. God’s nature is to be always giving. You see it in the sun and the moon and the stars, in every flower, in every bird in the air, in every fish in the sea. God communicates life to His creatures. And the angels around His throne, the seraphim and cherubim who are flames of fire, where does their glory come from? It comes from God because He is love, and He imparts to them part of His brightness and His blessedness. And we, His redeemed children-God delights to pour His love into us. Why? Because, as I said, God keeps nothing for Himself. From eternity God had His only begotten Son, and the Father gave Him all things, and nothing that God had was kept back. In Christ, God holds nothing back from us; that is what love does.

We’ll have to close in a few minutes, and I want to do that by offering a unique approach to what we began with tonight, which (again) was 2 Cor. 6:1-2;

We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says: “In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

The main way God has poured His love into us (as Murray put it), was to bring His Son to us. This is the greatest help we could ever have received. He has heard our cries for Life and Light, and He sent us the One Who said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”; “I am the Light of the world”.

To “receive the grace of God in vain” is to receive His Son, indwelling us by the Holy Spirit, and not allow the purpose of that Gift come to some measure of realization in our own lives. Here’s

what I mean. We know that Paul's wording in Gal. 2:20 emphasizes the reality of "Not I, but Christ", but we don't always know the implications of that in real life.

When Paul says, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" in Col. 1:27, that truth implies and includes the "Not I" of Gal. 2:20. Paul is saying that the only hope we have of the life, the glory, of the Lord being manifest through our mortal flesh is the indwelling Christ.

I want to try and demonstrate how clearly the scriptures show the complete helplessness of *anyone* to be vessels of the manifest glory of God to others based on their own strength, or on *anything* other than Christ in them.

So, to do this, I'm going to close our study tonight with a biographical sketch of the 1st. century disciples of Christ.

We don't know very much about the seventy. We know a little about some of the followers, like Mary Magdalene.

We know a good deal more about the twelve. Peter always stands out as a good representative of the others. What was true of him was true of them in many ways.

We look at them and there are a lot of good things about them. Quite a lot of good things about Simon Peter. I think in many ways he was a very lovable kind of man.

There's no doubt that on the credit side there was a very warm heart there. And a warm heart for his master. There was definitely good intention.

Good intentioned people can, as we say, put their foot in it often. But good intention was there. He meant well.

His motives were all the best. We could go on saying a lot of good things about him and about John.

There's no doubt about it; there was a very good credit side to these people. They're no worse than we are. Perhaps in many ways a great deal better than some of us.

The point is, human nature, not at its worst, but even at its best, was represented by that company around the Lord Jesus. With all their faults, sometimes they're blundering, yet not evil.

They were good, honest, open hearted men and women. In their intention and in a certain realm they were committed to Jesus.

Thoroughly committed to Jesus. Sometimes breaking out in very strong affirmations and declarations of devotion and intention to go to death with him should it ever become necessary.

Now, what's the real truth? What is the real eternal value of it all? How much of it *will* go through, survive and triumph? Not one bit. We see the complete desolation of all their confessions, all their declared good intentions, all their professions of love, devotion, faithfulness, lying in ruins. The most representative is denying repeatedly with oaths and with curses that he has any knowledge of this Galilean.

We needn't say any more. The utter hopelessness of human nature in itself. Where could hope be found? Would there ever be hope again? Will hope rise out of those ashes? Is it gone forever? Is it finally and eternally hopeless? Yes, if it's left to them.

If they're left to themselves, where will hope be? Not in themselves, but in Christ in them. That will be the hope of glory, change, and transfigured outlook.

And let us be very, very clear about this, dear friends, because it's just at this very point that you and I need to learn our lessons over again. The hope will never be found in ourselves. Even when we are Christians.

Even though we go right on as far as any Christian can go, if the Lord leaves us for five minutes, it's as hopeless as it was before we started. Paul said, "In me." And it's an apostle - a mature, experienced apostle, that is speaking and saying, "In me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing." There's no hope there.

There is absolutely no hope in man naturally.

We've got to learn that lesson, because you're always trying to find hope in yourself. That's your trouble.

Shall I put it another way? Your trouble is that you can't find any hope in yourself, and the fact that you're troubled about that shows that you want to. You expected to. You hoped to. You haven't given yourself up. God gave you up in the cross of Jesus Christ as a hopeless mess, and has shown by that very Cross how hopeless we are.

But in raising Jesus from the dead, taking him up, and then sending him in the Holy Spirit to dwell within, God started a new basis of hope. It is never in us. It is in Christ.

It never *will* be in us. We'll be as hopeless at the end as we were at the beginning. It will always be in Christ.

Friends, we've got to make everything to be out from Christ.

If only we could free ourselves from that old ground of self-expectation where we are concerned. We could quit that and get positively onto the ground of Christ. Christ my hope. With both hands I lay hold on Christ. Christ only. He is our only hope of glory.

This reminded me of something I read years ago, but often fail to keep in mind: "To be disappointed in self is to have trusted in self." It's a trap we need to avoid whenever possible.