

Real Servants Not Fakes

2 Corinthians 6:3-10

Turn to 2 Corinthians 6 please. This is a sermon for all you servants of Christ who have too many troubles, who don't impress people, and who regularly feel weak.

Problem at Corinth – Paul's troubles and weakness The Corinthian believers did not think Paul was a real apostle, mostly because he had too many troubles. He did not impress people, he did not look "successful" to them, he looked weak.

The Corinthians thought this because their society said people like Paul were not a success, as ours would say. And some false ministers came into that church that were impressive, they looked successful, and they did not look weak. They told the Corinthian believers that Paul was not much of an apostle, which the Corinthians had wondered about anyway.

Then they used other things against Paul, for example that Paul had changed his mind about returning quickly, or that Paul would not take money from them, to make Paul look worse. But the main problem was he had too many hardships, was too ordinary, looked weak.

Let's pay attention here because our society is like theirs, and the church in North America is like the church in Corinth. We also doubt ourselves because we have too many troubles, we don't see as much victory and triumph as we'd like. Shouldn't God's servants be more powerful?

We need to hear how God teaches us to respond to these ideas. In this letter, Paul talks about being a servant of Christ, or a minister, not about being an apostle. He has no doubt that he is a true apostle of Jesus Christ, but he speaks to them as a true servant, not a true apostle.

And who of us is not a servant of Christ? That's why I'm teaching 2 Corinthians, because we are all Christ's *servants*, and this letter is about true *servants*. In Greek, *servant* and *minister* are from the same Greek word (*diakonos*), and *service* and *ministry* are from a related Greek word (*diakonia*). God's servants and God's service – that what this letter is about. See appendix.

Response to the Problem – Hardship as their blessing, his credentials So, they say Paul has too many troubles, too much distress, not enough victory, far too ordinary. As an apostle he's a failure, if he's even an apostle at all.

Paul turned this thinking upside down. In four sections of 2 Corinthians he describes his troubles, and every time, his troubles and weakness make him a genuine servant of God. Four hardship lists. Today's text is the third.

The first description of Paul's troubles is in this letter's opening thanksgiving, 2 Cor 1:3. "Thanks to God for all his compassion and comfort in all our troubles," says Paul. And get this: "Our troubles are for *you Corinthians!* If *we* are troubled, it is so we can help *you* in *your* trouble. When *we* are comforted, it so we can pass on our comfort to *you*."

"Our troubles are for *your* good, *your* comfort. Don't throw *me* out because of *my* troubles, they help *you*, they make *me* a good servant of God for *you*."

The second sufferings paragraph begins at 4:7, "we have this treasure in jars of clay, so the greatness of the power would from God, not from us. We are always perplexed, but not wiped out, we are always thrown down, but never destroyed, etc. Why is it like this? So *we* can bring the dying and rising Christ to *you*."

"We carry around the *death* of Christ, so that Christ's *life* will work in *you*. Our troubles are for *your* good. Don't reject me because of my *troubles*, they bring God's life to *you*."

Those are the first two of the four sufferings sections. We'll do the third today, and the fourth is longer, in chapters 11-12. In the third and fourth lists of troubles, the logic is a bit different. Paul says, in my words, my troubles are my badge, my sufferings and distress are my certificate that I am a true servant of God, they are my license to prove that I'm the real thing.

If the false ministers had my troubles, they'd quit ministry in one week. If those who peddle the gospel for profit had my hardships and toil, they'd find a new business in one week. (He does not say this, but that seems to be the logic.)

His words: *We have this treasure in clay jars, so that the greatness of the power should be from God, not from us.* The Corinthians, especially the false servants, use Paul's hardships and distresses to prove that he's *not* the real thing, and Paul uses them to prove that he *is*.

NOW, let's get to our text.

2 Cor 6:3 *We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry (= "service") will not be discredited.* ⁴ *Rather, we commend ourselves in every way as servants of God:*

We live so that our service will not be discredited; and so you can be sure we really are God's servants. And what are his credits? What are his references?

6:4b-5 Paul's Credits and References Part One: Endurance and Troubles

In great endurance; in troubles, hardships, and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments, and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger.

He lists ten troubles. The heading over them all is “great endurance.” This is the overwhelming mark of a true minister: “great endurance.” That is like the title of his list. The other 9 come in three groups of three. The first set of three: *troubles, hardships, and distresses*.

These are all wide, general categories. The last, *distresses*, tells us that he did not just have difficult *circumstances*, but that there was also much *inner* trouble, fear and confusion, etc. Deep faith does not save one from fear and concern and discouragement and confusion. True servants of God endure a variety of troubles, hardships, and distresses.

The second set of three come from unpleasant people: *beatings, imprisonments, and riots*. Reading through Acts we see all of these happen. Other people were regularly brutal to Paul. If he had left Christ, he could have quit preaching and saved himself all this.

The third set are the physical difficulties of daily life: *hard work, sleepless nights, hunger*. Paul often lacked rest, sleep, and food. *Hard work, sleepless nights, hunger*.

These were all regular experiences for Paul: *All kinds of troubles, hardships, and distresses; from angry people: beatings, imprisonments, and riots; daily discomforts: hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger*.

Don't miss this remarkable thing, that when he's questioned about his genuineness before God, he begins with the troubles he has to endure. He does not just mention them, he parades them. They don't prove his a fake, they prove he's a real servant of Christ.

If you or I needed to write out why people should be confident that we are genuine servants of God, not fakes, what would we write? I don't know, actually. But Paul is obliged to write out his credentials, and he begins with: I endure many kinds of troubles.

6:6-7 Paul's Credits and References Part Two: Fruit of the Spirit

Now the list changes to character, to the kind of virtues Paul's life shows. This list is a lot like the fruit of the Spirit near the end of Galatians 5. True servants persist in serving Christ through many hardships, and they also treat people with patience and kindness and sincere love.

(We commend ourselves) 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.

The *purity* here is purity of motive, we are still sincere in wanting to serve Christ and be good to you. *Understanding* here will mean understanding God's ways, we know God's ways.

Purity of motives, understanding God's ways, patience and kindness toward people; 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.

In the Holy Spirit, in the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness. To be enduring all kinds of external and internal hardships, the first part of this list, and at the same time to have pure motives, to be patient and kind and have sincere love toward people, is more or less impossible! But the Holy Spirit can produce this in Christ's servants, and in us.

I don't show the fruit of the Spirit very well when life goes smoothly. The fruit of the Spirit takes a big hit when I'm tired, or hungry, or don't sleep well, or am around angry people who mistreat me. There's not much of the fruit of the Spirit left.

How could you tell a real apostle of Christ? Because they could endure all those troubles, distress and angry people and not enough rest, sleep, or food, and yet were patient, and kind, and showed sincere love. And the Corinthians will know this is all true of Paul.

That patience and kindness and sincere love? THAT is the power of God, THAT is the work of the Holy Spirit, those are the weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left. And the Corinthians know that Paul did live out all of these in front of them.

According to Acts 18, Paul was in Corinth 1½ years. Those believers saw him several times a week during that year and a half. He's not exaggerating either his hardships or his character, and they know it. This is how Paul shows that he really is a servant of God.

Miracles: what about apostolic signs and wonders? Are they not a part of Paul being a real apostle? Turn to 2 Corinthians 12. Near the end of 2 Corinthians, when Paul is beginning to wrap up this letter, he mentions signs and wonders.

2 Cor 12:12 *The signs of an apostle were done among you while I showed great endurance, signs and wonders and miracles.*

So Paul does mention the signs of an apostle in this letter, signs and wonders and miracles, as part of the reason they should not reject him. But notice: that is one verse. There are probably 40 verses in 2 Corinthians in the four hardship lists, 40 verses that make his troubles an essential part of his ministry, and one verse on miracles. (Last hardship list 30 verses long, 11:22 – 12:10.)

And this one verse happens near the end of the letter, sort of an afterthought, after the four hardship lists. The signs and miracles are not really a part of his argument.

And, even in the middle of this one sentence, we have “great endurance,” the same thing as began the list in 6:4. *The signs of an apostle were done among you while I showed great endurance.*

(The 2011 NIV has done something quite different with that phrase, which is grammatically possible, but almost all commentators past and recent assume “endurance” here means troubles, as 6:4.)

Paul performed miracles, plenty of them. But those miracles did not get him out of trouble. They showed other people that the gospel was real, but they did not make life easier for Paul. And they were not much use in proving he was an apostle.

The main evidence that he was real seems to come in two parts: one, he endured all kinds of hardship and distress, the kind of suffering that would cause a false minister to pack up long ago.

And two, by the power of God and the work of the Spirit, he lived out the fruit of the Spirit through this all suffering: pure motives, patient with people, kind, showed sincerely love. In different words, he had weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left.

6:8-10 Paul’s References and Credits Part Three: Trouble and Blessing, Always Both

This last section is wider, I am not sure how to summarize it, except that the true minister lives a life of contrasts, always good and bad. All of these have trouble of some kind in them.

(We commend ourselves) through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, 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.

I will read this again, slowly. This is Paul giving the credentials of a true servant of God (6:4a). Each contrast has both trouble and blessing. That flavour seems never to end. On going troubles seem to have been an essential part of being a true servant of God.

Notice: There’s not a hint here of steady difficulties meaning that we have sin in our lives, or that we are not trusting God enough, or that the people praying for us are not trusting God enough. If we asked Paul about this, I think he would say, “where on earth did you get that?”

The power of God, in this Scripture, is the combination of enduring troubles and showing the fruit of the Spirit in daily life. That is the power of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, and those are the weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left. The flavour of life is a regular mix of bad and good, trouble and blessing.

I do not mean to discourage prayer for relief and deliverance. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul will tell us a story from his own life where he prayed repeatedly for rescue from the Lord. It is not wrong to ask, he obviously thought there was a good chance the Lord would answer his prayer.

The Lord did not give Paul what Paul wanted, as it turned out, but Paul also had many prayers answered. In 2 Cor 1:8-11, he described a prayer that God ignored so long Paul had given up, and then God rescued him at the last moment. So pray for healing of all kinds.

But the persistence of troubles does not show the absence of God. Troubles along with comfort and joys are standard for God's servants. If we still serve Christ, and treat people kindly, we are living out the power of God in a remarkable way. And there is much of that in this room.

Amen.

Appendix: "Service" and "Servants" in 2 Corinthians

Diakonia, "service, ministry," 21 times in Paul, 11 in 2 Corinthians. Just over 1/2 are in 2 Corinthians.

Diakonos, "servant, minister," 21 times in Paul, 4 in 2 Corinthians.

Diakoneō, "to serve, to minister," 8 times in Paul, 3 in 2 Corinthians.

Together, this word-group occurs about 3 1/2 times as often in 2 Corinthians as in Paul's other letters.