

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

“All In” for the Ministry of Reconciliation Study #10

(2 Corinthians 6:1-13)

Introduction: Fence-sitting, 101...

There are few figures of speech in the English language as graphic and as immediately understandable as “he’s sitting on the fence.” Everybody knows what we mean when we say that we are “sitting on the fence” or “straddling the fence” on an issue.

To straddle a fence can be pretty uncomfortable, but it means that we haven’t landed on one side or another. We are ambivalent about something. And, given the complexity of life, there are a lot of fences to straddle.

- How to reduce the nation’s deficit?
- What to do about illegal immigration?
- How to improve healthcare?
- If you have money to invest, where to place it?
- If you’re in the latter years of High School, what to do next?
- If you’re at the beginning of a college career, what to major in?
- If you’re a single adult, do you pursue marriage?

For the first few years after college, my son, Zach, watched as one after another of his friends got married.

Describing himself as a “commitaphobe” Zach straddled the fence. He dated a few girls, but never landed.

Then, along came Courtney...

Their relationship blossomed and Zach gladly leaped off the fence, landed in love, and, three whole weeks and a day in to wedded bliss, hasn’t looked back.

As I speak about fence-sitting, you may be thinking about issues where you haven’t quite landed. Speaking personally, there are some issues about which I haven’t made up my mind. I haven’t decided which side I’m on, don’t know exactly where I stand. The splinters are unwelcome, but I’m not ready to jump.

Well, this morning, you and I are warned against fence-sitting when it comes to a certain aspect of the Christian life. And the Apostle Paul extends a white-hot invitation to us to leap off of the fence and land on the side of full engagement.

When we left last Sunday, we learned to self-identify as highly-placed ambassadors for Christ. Each one of us who have trusted Jesus has been posted and commissioned to represent Jesus to the people He so desperately loves.

Now, still writing to those who have entered into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus, and identifying himself and all other Christians as co-workers with God (WOW!), he issues an urgent warning.

An Urgent Invite to the Ministry of Reconciliation (vv. 1-2)

Receiving the Grace of God in Vain (v. 1)

[1]And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain

Defining “grace”

The first thing we need to do when wrestling with this particular verse is to get a handle on what Paul means when he speaks of “the grace of God.”

Wherever it appears in Scripture, *grace* is a gift. And the context in which the reference to grace appears determines what is the gift in view.

For instance, if Paul had just been talking about forgiveness, then the particular “grace of God” would be the gift of forgiven sin. If he had been talking about spiritual gifts, and then mentioned “the grace of God,” we would assume that the grace of God would refer to those gifts.

Shortly we’ll come to 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 where Paul talks about the beauty of generosity. He refers to generosity with money as a “grace.”

So, what “grace/gift” is Paul referring to here in 2 Corinthians 6:1?

Defining this “grace”

Well, he has just been talking about the ministry of reconciliation (chapter 5). He has been telling us that each one of us has been given (graced with) the honor and the privilege of sharing Jesus with those around us.

So, the “grace of God” referred to here in 6:1 is, particularly, the gift of the ministry of reconciliation. And we are warned to not receive this gift “in vain.

So, again, what would THAT mean?

Receiving a gift “in vain”?

Well, the word vanity means *empty*. And to receive something “emptily” would be to receive it and then to not put it to use. I’ve received gifts that I’ve not put to use, and you probably have, too.

(You know, like that tie you received for Christmas...)

For a Christian to receive the ministry of reconciliation from God “in vain” would be for that Christian to live as if he or she had NOT received the ministry of reconciliation. It would be to NOT be all about sharing Jesus.

And, it is so possible that any of us might not be all about sharing Jesus. We might ignore open doors and overlook golden opportunities and reject perfectly timed moments to speak.

We might engage in Jesus-centered interaction with those who don’t know Him, and we might not. We might eagerly talk with others about their need for Christ, and we might not.

I believe that Paul is issuing a very timely warning to all of us here this morning at Northwest. It was evidently timely for the church at Corinth.

Evidently, as he wrote, the Corinthian church was either guilty of having received the grace of God in vain (this particular grace of the ministry of reconciliation), or was on the verge of doing so.

And if you are on the verge of falling into the same trap of receiving this particular “grace” of God in vain, Paul is writing to you.

So here is a question.

How much sense does it make to not share Christ with the people we know, especially in light of all God has done for us?

NOW is the Time! (v. 2)

[2] for He says, “AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU’ behold, now is ‘THE ACCEPTABLE TIME,’ behold, now is ‘THE DAY OF SALVATION”

God helped us in our “Now!” moment

None of us have ever had to twist God’s arm or force God’s hand to grace us with salvation, have we?

From day one, He has always been more eager to bless us and to provide for us exactly what we have needed than we have been eager to receive it. Our God is an incredibly giving God. He is good to us, better than we deserve and better than we would expect.

God said “Yes” to our calling out to Him the instant we did so. He didn’t even wait for us to get our acts together. No! He demonstrated His love for us in that He saved us while we were still sinners. Christ died for us while we were still in rebellion. (Romans 5:8.)

So, when it comes to doing us good, there is only one time on God’s wristwatch (NOW!), and one day on His calendar (TODAY!).

Well, guess what. Take a look at your watch - it’s NOW, right now. Check your calendar and you’ll find that it’s TODAY, today.

It’s time for you and me to jump in, put the grace of God to work (wonderful oxymoron!) and engage in the ministry of reconciliation.

Now is our NOW! Today is our TODAY!

There are people you know who need to hear about Jesus. And they need to hear about Jesus from you. You have daily contact with them. You are their friend. You hang together. As Christ’s ambassador, you are uniquely positioned to bring the message of reconciliation their way.

Today. Now.

It’s tempting to put it off, to procrastinate, (After all, why do things today that you can procrastinate over until tomorrow?)

Tomorrow. Manana. The sad thing is that “tomorrow” never comes.

One of our enemy’s most brilliant tactics is the strategy of tomorrow. Often he won’t even try to tempt us to say “NO!” to God’s invitation to share Jesus with our friends. He’s craftier than that.

He whispers, “*Later. Tomorrow. Not now.*”

And God says, “*Now! Today!*”

You have been “graced” with the ministry of reconciliation! It’s time to unwrap that gracious gift and start putting it to use.

Simply put, TODAY is the day for you to stop straddling the fence, jump off and jump in to the great adventure of engaging in the ministry of reconciliation!

It only makes sense for you and for me to share Christ, given what Christ has shared (salvation; the ministry of reconciliation) with us.

Paul serves as an excellent role model when it comes to full engagement in this evangelistic endeavor. He was certainly “all in.”

And he tells us that he is so committed to it that he has orchestrated his whole life so as to be at maximum for that ministry.

Snapshot from a Life “ALL IN” for the Ministry of Reconciliation (vv. 3-10)

Demonstrating Integrity (vv. 3-4a)

[3] giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, [4a] but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God,

Paul's going to do everything he can to conduct himself in such a way that the ministry (the whole Christian faith!) is not discredited by his words, his actions, or his attitudes.¹

We have probably all witnessed the tragedy of someone - sometimes a high profile someone - making a mess of his or her life, misbehaving badly, and discrediting the faith in full view of a watching world.

A Christian's hypocrisy or lack of integrity has devastating effect on those who haven't yet trusted Christ.

How can a person without Christ see people with Christ living as if they didn't have Christ come to any conclusion other than, "*There must not be very much to all of this noise about Christ.*"?

And, high profile or not, every one of us who have trusted Jesus have been given an ambassadorial posting right where we are. We are Jesus' representative. And, for good or ill, our lives have an impact on the interest people around us give to the Gospel we bring.

The faith will be discredited by our poor testimony AND it will be validated in the eyes of outsiders by our integrity.

Paul was one guy who made lifestyle choices on the basis of what would be a credit to the Gospel. He lived for the Gospel regardless of what life threw his way. And life did throw quite a few curves his way.

For instance, Paul suffered actual and overt physical suffering as a result of living for Jesus. He catalogues some of it in the words before us.

¹ If Paul's goal was to not give offense, we would have to say that he failed miserably and did not attain his goal, because it is clear that he offended people right and left. (For that matter, so did Jesus.) Paul knew full well that he would not be able to avoid giving offense to some people some of the time, simply because of the nature of the message he was bringing. But Paul's passion for the Gospel was so great that he wanted to live in such a way that no one could **legitimately** point a finger at him and say, "*The Gospel must be false - look at the way Paul lives!*"

Bearing with Hardship (vv. 4b-5, 8-10)

Overt physical suffering

[4b] in much endurance², in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, [5] in beatings³, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness⁴, in hunger⁵

Sometime, take some time and page through the letters of the New Testament and the book of Acts. You'll find evidence that Paul personally experienced just about every suffering he lists here.

For Paul, embracing the ministry of reconciliation involved pain - and some of it was pretty extreme.

Beatings at Lystra, imprisonments in Philippi, and tumults (riots) in Ephesus. This is big-time stuff. Many, many of our brothers and sisters around the world are certainly enduring these kinds of sufferings. But the fact that we are not now being sent to prison for our faith doesn't mean that our lives have no connection to what Paul describes as autobiography.

What about sleeplessness? Have you ever gotten up early to meet a friend for breakfast to talk about Jesus stuff? Have you ever stayed up late - later than was comfortable because of a friend in need? If so, you know what Paul's talking about. Being sleep deprived is no fun.

² Ray Stedman sees "endurance" being the overriding way in which Paul handled all of the hardships enumerated in this list. It functions sort of like "above reproach" does in the list of elder qualifications in 1 Timothy 3.

³ We don't know on what other occasions he was beaten, besides his Philippian experience (Acts 16).

⁴ An example of this is found at Acts 20:7-16

⁵ With many others, I do not think that Paul is talking about purposeful fastings here, although there are other passages where it is clear that he did engage in the practice of fasting from time to time.

And hunger? Have you ever had to miss a meal because of a commitment to serve Jesus? Who enjoys hunger, even a little bit?

Ever been so involved in meaningful, life-on-life service to someone in the Name of Jesus that your schedule has gotten all messed up, and you've had to re-schedule some crucial meetings, and you're just exhausted? Well, you know where Paul's coming from. Being rested is nice, but we can't always enjoy being rested if we are going to be "all in" for the ministry of reconciliation.

Despite all that Paul faced, he didn't quit. He endured. He remained faithful despite physical pain.

Paul also suffered in other ways. In our culture, being known as a "*fine, upstanding Christian*" is usually considered decent for a reputation.

Not necessarily so for Paul...

Damage to reputation

[8] by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report, regarded as deceivers and yet true, [9] as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live, as punished yet not put to death

Sometimes Paul was accepted with every mark of honor (Gal. 4:14) and sometimes he was out and out rejected (1 Thess. 2:2).

He knew what it was to be toast of the town AND he knew what it was to be tossed out of town.

He knew what it was to have his words accepted as true and to see those words come home with life-changing impact, AND he knew what it was to be grossly misunderstood - even purposefully misunderstood - and to have the meanings of his words twisted.

He had great friends and powerful enemies. Some of his current enemies were formerly great friends, and some of his best friends now used to be his most hated enemies.

People kept trying to put him to death, yet he kept turning up alive.

His physical life was a roller-coaster! And so was his emotional life. I'm really struck by one of the phrases in this catalogue of life experiences because it shows such a contradictory study in contrast - ***[10a] as sorrowful yet always rejoicing...***

Paul was "all in" when it came to telling people about Jesus. That doesn't mean that anybody would have envied his financial portfolio.

Material lack

[10b]...as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

Looking at Paul's "have" list, it would be easy to see him as someone to be pitied, or at least as someone not to be envied. He was the picture of abject destitution - no home, no money, no possessions.

But his words betray his own belief that he was Bill Gates and Warren Buffett rolled into one when it came to the things that really matter. He possessed every spiritual blessing imaginable and had friends to die for. That's real wealth!

There are other descriptors of his life embedded in this passage. These don't speak so much of suffering as they do of Paul's experience of God's strength as he faced life's challenges.

Channeling God's Power (vv. 6, 7)

[6] in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit⁶, in genuine love, [7] in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness, for the right hand and the left⁷

That's quite a list! And that list speaks of an extraordinary life. God's fingerprints are all over that life. The fruit of the Spirit is sprouting, the presence of the Spirit is manifest, the power of God is flowing.

There is triumph in the midst of trial. Things are tough, but there is victory. There is impact for Jesus even when he is misunderstood and suffering. He is joyfully enduring despite pain.

As he does so often and so well in this second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes autobiographically. He wants to give us an accurate picture of what life is really like for someone who is "all in" for Christ and who has committed to the ministry of reconciliation, lock, stock, and barrel.

I hear a whole symphony of authenticity here. About Paul there was nothing fake or contrived. Nothing shallow. There is substance.

One of the bubbles that must be burst is any thought that when we engage in the ministry of reconciliation, we can expect certain things to work out for us, that life will fall out somewhat predictably and positively, that we will be protected from the worst life can throw at us.

⁶ The commentators are divided as to whether this is a reference to the third Person of the Trinity (the Holy Spirit) or to "a holy spirit" within the believer (i.e. a commitment to holiness). I am more drawn to see Paul referencing the Holy Spirit of God, since he is highlighting in what specific ways he is actually being dependent on God. Here and elsewhere in his writings, Paul is telling us that he was dependent on the Holy Spirit to live a Christ-honoring life.

⁷ The full listing of our armor is found in Ephesians 6. More will come in this letter in chapter 10 regarding the theme of spiritual warfare.

Paul gives those thoughts the lie here. Paul's life was, well, challenging.

And yet, it was full ("*abundant*" as Jesus puts it in John 10:10).

That's why he can, without reservation, say what he goes on to say to us in the final verses. He invites us to jump off the fence and land in this marvelous adventure of full engagement in the ministry of reconciliation.

What follows is intensely personal.

Fellowship in the Ministry of Reconciliation (vv. 11-13)

Paul is Open with His Friends (v. 11)

[11] Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians⁸, our heart is opened wide."

Here is one sure sign that we love someone: when we are open to share what is most important to us. We simply don't share our innermost selves with those we don't love. And Paul has cut himself open and given the Corinthians a good, hard look at his life.

He told them about his sufferings, his humiliations and his up and down, roller-coaster life. He let them in on his inner turmoil and his experience of God's power. He held nothing back.

If it hadn't been already, his life has become an open book to them. His willingness to tell-all was prompted by his love for them, his longing for them.

We are pretty certain that Paul and the Corinthians had, at one time, been really, really close. He stayed there for eighteen months and developed intimate bonds with many there in the church at Corinth.

⁸ The mention of their name adds great love and warmth and affection.

However, the relationship between them had cooled off. It didn't use to be cool, but warm and deep and transparent and genuine and authentic and vulnerable and life-changing and below-the-surface.

Not anymore. They have shut down.

Paul's Friends' are Closed to Him! (v. 12)

[12] You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections.

He was being open with them, but they were not being open toward him. They have become unresponsive.

Paul had turned on the fire hose to shower love on them, but they were unwilling to turn on the garden hose in return.

He had opened the front door to let them see what was going on with him. They refused to uncover the "peep hole" for him to see what was going on with them.

This change in their posture toward him deeply grieved Paul. The break in their relationship was painful to him and he begged them to open up again to him.

Paul Pleads for Openness! (v. 13)

[13] Now in a like exchange-- I speak as to children-- open wide to us also.

Can you hear the longing in those words? He wants relationship with these folks. And more. Not just friendship. He wants a deep experience of community.

The Christian word for fellowship, *koinonia*, captures what Paul is asking for. *Koinonia* speaks of shared life.

I'm confident that you long for the exact same thing. Whether it is in a Care Group or Sunday School class or a Bible study or some other gathering of Christian friends, you want more than surface relating. You hunger for connection at the soul-to-soul level.

Notice something. Notice that the passage of Scripture that ends with Paul expressing his deep desire for relationship starts with an invitation to his friends to fully engage in ministry.

There is a link between deep, rich, soul-to-soul Christian friendship and Christians who are serving Jesus. In fact, when it comes to intimate relationships with each other, the key is partnership in serving Him.

Conclusion:

Paul would tell us that the deep and intimate relationships we long for are not found by seeking them. They are found as we serve Jesus.

So... engaging in the ministry of reconciliation:

- brings honor to God;
- is loving to your friends AND;
- creates a context for you to enjoy the richest Christian community!

Talk about blessings!

Let's not miss out on them. Let's run together into full engagement in the ministry of reconciliation!

The carrot at the end of the stick for being "all in" for Jesus is a richness in community that cannot be found except among those who are also "all in" for Jesus.