SERVANTS OF GOD

2 Corinthians 6:3–10

Key Verse: 6:4a

“Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way…”

Have you ever had to defend yourself? Some people do it all the time, quite naturally, without even thinking—defending their actions, their ideas, their attitudes, and really, anything about themselves. Others would rather just remain quiet and let people think whatever they want. In today’s passage Paul defends himself, sharing what it means to live as a real servant of God. Why does he do it? An even bigger question is: how could Paul live this way? And what does it all mean to us as believers? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verse 3. Here, the word “anyone” stands out. Paul meant Jews and Greeks in society at large, as well as people in the church of God (1Co10:32). Paul wasn’t reckless; he was mindful and prayerful no matter who he was with. But what does he mean by “stumbling block”? The Greek word literally means to stub one’s toe; figuratively it means to cause somebody to fall down. In this case, it’s to turn away from the path of following Jesus. What things might we possibly be doing that might be causing others to turn away from Jesus? It might be the things we’re saying—offensive or hurtful things that don’t represent Jesus at all. Or it might be the things we’re doing—unethical, immoral, selfish, hypocritical things that turn people off. It can mean passing judgment on others (Ro14:13). It can mean enjoying things or rights that others find offensive (Ro14:20; 1Co8:9). It can especially mean indulging in some kind of sin, even just a little bit, that misleads others to do the same (Mt5:29). The hypocrisy of so-called believers has always been a huge turnoff to non-believers (Ro2:23,24).

Paul is determined not to do this. Why? He says in verse 3b, “…so that our ministry may not be discredited.” The word for “discredited” is literally blemished, and it means finding some fault or flaw, something to criticize. What ministry is Paul talking about? Generally, it’s a ministry of serving and helping others. But in chapter 3 Paul calls it “the ministry of the new covenant” (3:6). In chapter 5 he calls it “the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18). He says it’s a glorious ministry (3:8–10), a ministry that brings people back to God (5:20b). It’s the ministry of the Spirit, the ministry that brings righteousness (3:8,9), the ministry that changes people’s hearts (3:3). Even in the secular world, helping others in any way is a selfless, beautiful thing, but we need to remember it can be ruined by even one bad act or actor. We need to protect and defend gospel ministry to be outstanding, spotless, exemplary, not to promote ourselves, but in order to not hinder others, in any way, shape or form, from receiving God’s grace (6:1).

Read verse 4a. The Greek sentence emphasizes “in every way,” in all things. In this letter Paul has repeatedly written about “commending” himself (3:1; 4:2; 5:12). Why does he keep talking about this? These people already knew Paul well. He’d lived among them for over a year and a half and was the one who actually got their church started. But in his activities afterwards and in his letters there were some misunderstandings. Also, some people still didn’t understand or trust him. Probably some others had come into their church to spread even more opposition to him. Paul’s self-defense wasn’t for his own sake, unlike most people’s; it was to repair their relationship and prove his love for them. Ultimately, it was so as not to hinder the gospel of Christ itself (1Co9:12b).

In Greek the word “commend” means “to present as worthy of regard, kindness or confidence.” In the midst of all the criticisms, Paul wanted people to have full confidence in him and what he was doing. Usually people try to gain such confidence by what they say, but Paul was sure he could have it by how he lived. He describes himself and his team of coworkers as “servants of God.” What does he mean? When he introduces himself in his letters, Paul often calls himself “a servant of Christ” (Ro1:1; 1Co3:5; 4:1; 2Co4:5; Gal1:10; Php1:1; Col1:23,25; Tit1:1). Sometimes the word he uses refers to a slave or someone who works with their hands. But here the word in Greek is “minister.” The root of this word can mean someone who works in the dust, or someone who hurries. Often people use this term “servant of God” to refer to somebody with authority, somebody above others and deserving of great respect. But actually, it means just the opposite—someone who’s most humble and diligent in helping others. How did Paul become such a servant? When he realized that Christ died for him, he no longer lived for himself; he lived for Christ who died for him and was raised again (5:15). Paul said all Christians are to live this way, to focus our lives on serving Christ himself.

The Greek for “servants of God” in verse 4 can also be translated as “agents of God.” It reminds us of Paul’s words in chapter 5: “we are Christ’s ambassadors” (5:20a), his representatives in the world. Being sent out on this mission, Paul was keenly aware that in every way he was actually representing Christ. That’s why he wasn’t free to just do whatever he wanted. It’s also true of every believer, everyone trying to follow Jesus—we represent him. We’re all called to be his hands and feet in the world. People are watching. So we need to get motivated to live like Paul, as ambassadors, agents, ministers, servants of Christ. Is that the first thing we think about ourselves, that I’m a servant of God? The first step in changing our behavior is to deeply accept this identity. Paul knew he was a servant only by God’s grace (1Ti1:12–16). We too need to be motivated by God’s grace in our lives, like Paul was, to do our best to serve him (2Ti2:15). Like Paul, as servants of God we need to please everyone in every way, so that they may be saved (1Co10:33). Above all, we need make it our goal to please our Lord Jesus in all that we do (5:9).

In verses 4b–10 Paul goes on to describe how he lived authentically, with integrity, as a servant of God. As they say, some people only talk the talk, but Paul actually walked the walk. As they also say, actions speak louder than words. What Paul says in these verses should cause us to reflect on our lifestyle and ask ourselves, “Am I really living as a servant of Christ?” As we reflect on these verses, we want to learn Paul’s secret, how he could actually live like this. He begins with the phrase, “in great endurance.” This phrase actually modifies everything else that follows. In all these things, Paul showed great endurance. The Greek word means “the inner strength to withstand hardship or stress.” Where did this inner strength come from? He wrote back in chapter 1, “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (1:8b,9). Paul’s inner strength, his great endurance, came from his resurrection faith in Jesus (1Co15:58). Servants of God live out their resurrection faith.

Look at verses 4b,5. Paul begins by describing his experiences: “troubles, hardships and distresses; beatings, imprisonments and riots; hard work, sleepless nights and hunger.” The first three are general sufferings in life that can happen to anyone. The next three are persecutions that are bound to happen when we share the gospel clearly. The last three are self-imposed sufferings we willingly embrace in order to spread the gospel. They say that in hard circumstances we show our true colors. If we cave in and give up, it calls into question what we stand for. But if we persevere, it shows what we really believe. Why was Paul willing to go through all these hard things? It was because he truly believed the good news of Jesus. He was staking his very life on it. He was willing to suffer anything for it, to sacrifice anything for it, if only he could advance the gospel. All real servants of God endure such hardships for the gospel’s sake.

In verse 6 he goes on to describe his inner character: “…in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love…” Some people can endure really intense hardships, but underneath their inner lives are still angry, bitter and rebellious. Paul’s inner life was just the opposite. In the same way, it’s not just life experiences but character that defines us. Purity is first on Paul’s list. Inner purity is not something we’re born with, nor can we fake it; it happens only when we confess our sins and let the blood of Jesus cleanse us deep within and purify our motives and desires (1Jn1:7,9). “Understanding” can mean understanding God as well as understanding others. Sufferings often enhance such deep understanding of God and others (cf. 1:3–5). The Greek word for “patience” here is literally our English word “long-suffering.” It’s a willingness to suffer with others to the very end. “Kindness” is so important to a servant of God. God himself is kind to the ungrateful and wicked (Lk6:35). God expressed his kindness to us in Christ Jesus by giving us the incomparable riches of his grace, despite all our sins (Eph2:7). Even though they think they’re serving God, some people are just being mean and rude. As God’s servants we all need to really learn and practice his kindness. The phrase “in the Holy Spirit” tells us that all these inner attributes Paul had were actually the fruits of the Holy Spirit in his life. The Holy Spirit made him inwardly pure, gave him deep understanding, long-suffering patience and real kindness. In Greek the phrase “in sincere love” literally means “love that’s not an act.” Some people are good at acting like they love, using their voices, words and gestures. But the love Paul mentions here is genuine, real, and it’s another gift of the Spirit. To really be trusted, any so-called servant of God needs these inner qualities.

Look at verse 7a. A servant of God is basically a messenger and warrior. God’s servants have to speak the truth and depend only on God’s power, not on their ability to persuade people. God’s servants also have to fight with weapons. Why does there have to be a fight? So many of us really don’t like conflict. But it’s because the world we live in is living in rebellion against God. There are so many strongholds, arguments and pretensions against God all around us (10:4,5). If we’re going to serve God in such a world, we’ve got to be willing to fight. But we don’t fight with our own strength or methods. Paul says it’s with weapons of righteousness. And he says we’ve got to hold these weapons in both hands. Maybe he means one for offense and one for defense. Maybe he means to use these weapons in every situation, good or bad. But the weapons God gives his servants are most effective and powerful. A servant of God needs to be humble and loving, but also God’s truthful messenger, and God’s warrior.

In verses 8­–10 Paul describes all the ups and downs of ministry. Life itself has all kinds of ups and downs. But here Paul is referring to all the ups and downs in the ministry of the gospel. We would like it if gospel ministry were just fun and made us feel good all the time. But it’s not like that. There’s dishonor, bad report, being regarded as an impostor, being unrecognized, dying, being beaten, sorrows, poverty and ending up with nothing in our hands. Wow! No wonder not many people don’t want to live as servants of God. But Paul isn’t just venting or complaining. In these verses he’s inspired. He’s dauntless. He’s testifying to the victory God gives even in the midst of all of this. In Jesus we have glory. In Jesus we’ll have a good report. In Jesus we’re genuine. In Jesus we’re known. In Jesus, “Look!” it literally says in Greek, “we live on!” In Jesus we’re not killed. In Jesus we’re always rejoicing. In Jesus, and like Jesus, we don’t get rich but we make many others rich. In Jesus we may have nothing but actually possess everything. The Corinthians liked worldly power, knowledge and wealth, so they really didn’t like Paul’s sufferings. They thought they disqualified him as a servant of God. But Paul was inspired by these sufferings; in a sense he was very proud of them. He felt so privileged and blessed to participate in the sufferings of Christ. In light of these verses, ministry is always going to be hard. But in Jesus we shouldn’t hesitate. In Jesus we shouldn’t calculate. In Jesus we shouldn’t complain. As servants of God, like Paul we should find the greatest meaning and joy in bringing the gospel to others. In light of Paul’s words, we have no good excuses for being too tired or burned out.

Read verse 4a again. May God renew our identity in his grace as a servant of God. May God help us be determined like Paul to live in every way so that our ministry will be exemplary. May God grant us the Holy Spirit so that we can have great endurance, authenticity and enthusiasm to bring people the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.