

Accepting God's Grace for Holiness

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[0 : 0 0] Well, please be seated, and I encourage you to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 940 to 2 Corinthians chapter 6. And this is part of our summer series, Wednesday nights and Sundays, and let's pray now.

Lord God, speak to us from your word this morning, we pray. Write it in our hearts that we may believe it, and follow the Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray this for his sake and glory. Amen.

A friend of mine was ordained last week as an Anglican priest, and he'd invited me to his ordination, but sadly I couldn't go.

And the main reason that I couldn't was because it was in Istanbul. I'd thought about a quick trip to support him seriously, because he needs support. Engin is Turkish, and I think he's probably the first Anglican-Turkish ordained minister.

And the Anglican Church in Turkey is very small and almost exclusively expatriate English, and certainly English-speaking, and mainly fairly liberal in its theology.

[1 : 1 2] Now, Engin's ordination last year as a deacon and this year as a priest has not been without controversy. When he was ordained deacon last year, I think in England, in London, there were letters not only to the church newspapers, but also letters to the Times of London, complaining that he was being ordained because he was Turkish, and because he wanted people to be converted to Christ, in particular Muslims, which is 99.5% of the Turkish population.

This time he was ordained priest in Turkey, but all the expatriate Anglican congregations refused to allow the Bishop of Europe to use their buildings.

And so in the end, he was ordained last week in a Calvinist chapel in Istanbul. Their objection is that because he's evangelical, he wants to see people converted. That means, in Turkey, Muslims.

Muslims, and it seems from the letters and from what I've read and heard from Engin, that the expatriate congregation, the main one is in Istanbul, they fear for their security and safety, that somehow this will be a little bit provocative for Muslims, and therefore they, living in Istanbul, might have their lives a little bit disturbed.

Their security and safety might be, in some ways, compromised. And as you read their letters and get a feel for what they're like from talking with him and others, their Christianity is the sort of cucumber sandwich vicarage tea party variety of Christianity.

[2 : 4 7] And I encourage you to pray for Engin, pray for Christians in Turkey, because there is an escalation of persecution against Christians in Turkey. There have been missionaries and pastors and priests who have been killed there in the last two years.

But I wonder what the Apostle Paul, writing from Turkey, would have made of it, all of this. My guess is that he would thoroughly be siding with the bishop and with Engin, and seeing the role of Christian ministry in Turkey, to see people converted to Christ from whatever background they come from.

Paul writes this letter to Corinthians, probably from Turkey, and writes to a church that he founded in Greece that is moving away from the gospel. They're doing so under the influence of some people who've come into Corinth and are trying to mislead the congregation, away from the gospel and away from the teaching that Paul had given them when the church started, and also away from Paul himself.

And what we've found so far and we see throughout this letter is a very long and substantial defense of Paul's ministry. Not because he's worried about his own reputation, I don't think he is in the end, but rather because he's worried about the gospel.

And his defense of himself is actually a defense of the gospel of the death of Jesus Christ. It seems too that as part of this, the Corinthian church is still compromised in its practice of pagan practices and compromised also in its morality.

[4 : 16] We see a little bit of that reflected in the first letter that Paul wrote to Corinth in 1 Corinthians, and there's glimpses of it here as well. So for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the same Jesus who was given as sin for us, though he knew no sin, as the end of chapter 5 made clear, for the sake of that Jesus Christ and for the sake of the gospel of his death for us, which we do not deserve, Paul writes defending his own ministry, and he continues that in chapter 6.

In the light of the grace of the gospel and in the light of Jesus' death as a substitution for us, Paul writes at the beginning of chapter 6, as we work together with him, God, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

The grace of God is a mercy that we don't deserve. Christian faith is not about receiving our just desserts. It's about receiving God's grace or mercy, which we do not deserve.

But we can receive that in vain. Well, that's at least the threat for the Corinthians, that if they move away from the gospel and move away from Paul's teaching, as they compromise with their idolatry and compromise on morality, then they're receiving the grace of God in vain.

Because it's not cheap grace. It's grace that is meant to lead us step by step more into the likeness of the Lord Jesus, as the end of chapter 3 made so clear that we saw a couple of weeks ago.

[5 : 46] The grace of God is there for our perfection, ultimately. The grace of God is meant to work within us, changing us more and more to be like Jesus in holiness and morality.

And if we fail in that growth, if we reject that growth, if we compromise our morality, then we receive the grace of God in vain. It's cheap grace, not costly grace then.

And for the Corinthians, this is coming about, at least the threat of it, under influence of false teachers and under the influence of the world's values. So with urgency, Paul exhorts them in the next verse too.

At an acceptable time I've listened to you, and on a day of salvation I've helped you. See, now is the acceptable time. See, now is the day of salvation. Paul has got some urgency here.

He's saying now is the day to live lives in response to God's grace, because soon in the future, all will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

[6 : 50] He made that clear back in chapter 5, verse 10. So because of that judgment day that is coming and soon, now is the day of salvation. Now is the day to respond to God's grace with faith and not to ignore it in immorality.

He quotes in that verse from the prophet Isaiah. And Isaiah is exhorting the Christians who are in exile, saying the day is coming when you'll be brought back to God and back to the land, and that will come through the ministry of the suffering servant.

And many of you will be familiar with the picture in Isaiah of the servant who suffers, who carries the griefs and sorrows of the world on his shoulders, who is put to death for our sins, as a clear prefiguring of the Lord Jesus' death on the cross.

Now Paul, I think, deliberately uses that passage, not simply for those words about the time of salvation, but as so often in the New Testament, when a quote of the Old Testament comes, it's the whole context that is carried into the New Testament.

And the context here is the ministry of this suffering servant who dies for the sins of God's people. But also, Paul sees his ministry in line with that ministry of Christ.

[8 : 06] And that ministry of a suffering servant is how Paul sees his own valid Christian ministry. So he says in verse 3, We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God, we've commended ourselves in every way.

That is, Paul has been, it seems, ridiculed and despised because he suffered so much. He actually began this letter by defending his life of afflictions.

And now he's saying, I think by allusion in the quote of Isaiah, I am a servant of God, and that suffering servant of Isaiah, well, he suffered, obviously, and that's the ministry of Christ.

And if I'm to follow the ministry of Christ in ministry of his gospel, then suffering is part and parcel of Christian ministry and Christian life in general, too.

That's why I think he calls himself deliberately there a servant. And he goes on now in the verses that follow in the rest of this first paragraph to show that his ministry is clearly one of valid suffering.

[9 : 16] What would authentic Christian ministry look like? Cucumber sandwiches and vicarage tea parties? I don't think so. I don't think there's a whiff of cucumber in the New Testament. Christian ministry is about suffering.

Indeed, Christian life is about suffering. It's not simply for the ministers. But that's Paul's focus here. He gives us, in fact, 27 features of his ministry.

Now, I'm not going to give you a test and ask you to recite all 27 at the end. They actually come in three blocks of nine, and at least hopefully we might remember the three blocks in general terms.

The first block is about endurance through affliction. And verse 4 goes on to list nine things. The first three are general sufferings that come from opposition to Christian life, faith and ministry.

Paul says, And they're just general, all-encompassing terms for all sorts of things that Paul has suffered in his life.

[10 : 20] If you read the Acts of the Apostles, you can see time and again things that fit into those categories. Then being maybe a little bit more specific, in verse 5, beatings, imprisonments, and riots.

And again, we see those things in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul was imprisoned in Philippi, for example. There were riots in Ephesus, for example, as a result of his preaching and ministry. And then three things that aren't necessarily because of oppositional persecution, but they show that in general, Christian ministry has its own hardship.

Labours, meaning sort of hard work and toil, sleepless nights, one of the few things that I can identify with, and hunger. And for Paul, I think that's partly because of poverty and because of being an itinerant minister and because of the work of ministry doesn't, for him, pay.

Well, there's nine things, sufferings and afflictions, that Paul has gone through. He's not complaining. The disciple is not above his master. Jesus says, if you want to follow me, you carry a cross, which is more than just a sort of token of jewellery, but it's a preparedness to die.

Jesus frequently exhorts his followers in general, and not least those who follow him in ministry, that they will suffer for Jesus' sake.

[11 : 43] Paul is making that clear here to the Corinthians. You might think little of me because I suffer. It might be that these so-called super apostles that have come in, they look so much more successful, they're not actually following the path of the suffering servant.

Suffering is actually a mark of valid Christian ministry. He's defending his ministry in the line of Christ. I wonder what the expatriate Anglican Christians of Istanbul would think about this.

It seems that their fear of lack of security or safety shows that they don't really understand the path of the suffering servant. And I fear that they don't actually understand the gospel and the death of Christ as well.

Well, there's more to Paul's list. The next nine things relate to moral integrity. The first six in verse seven are all about internal godly character.

Paul says that I've endured through with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love.

[12 : 57] Well, each of those could be explored in more detail. We don't have time to do that. Paul is again defending his integrity as a minister, his internal character and motive in ministry.

All of those are marks of the Lord Jesus Christ himself as well. Paul, I think, is also reflecting that those things not only contribute to his endurance, but probably they actually evoke some of the opposition and hardship that the previous two verses have mentioned.

Paul again, as we've seen a few times in this letter, is making it clear that ministry and ministers and Christians indeed, in general, are to be judged not by external appearances, but by the inside.

Admittedly, as humans, we can't do that with perfect knowledge, but God can. And there have been times in this letter where Paul has said, before I was a Christian, for example, I judge people with a human point of view.

That's how I viewed Christ. But now that I'm a believer and I've been converted on that road to Damascus, now I judge people with God's eyes to an extent, is what he's implying.

[14 : 06] And he's here, I think, again with a veiled criticism of these other teachers and how they're beguiling the Corinthians. Judge me according to God's standards. Judge me on issues of integrity.

And the last three in this group of nine, which come in the next verse, verse seven, they're more about integrity in speech and ministry than just in general character.

Truthful speech, the power of God, weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left. Truthful speech, because as we've seen already, Paul is alluding to the fact that the false teachers are peddling God's word, either tampering with it or diluting it, peddling it maybe for the sense of personal gain as well.

Paul several times defends his integrity and motive in his ministry. And so here he's defending the fact that he speaks truthfully, clearly, not with manipulation, not putting it with a lot of political spin, not with flattery to win over itching ears, not with a sort of social nicety either, using the right words in the right company.

He speaks boldly, clearly, unequivocally the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He's already spelled that out a bit earlier. Chapter four, verse two, he said, we've renounced the shameful things that one hides.

[15 : 33] We refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word. But by the open statement of the truth, we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Paul, I think here, as back in chapter four, is implying that these false teachers, they're falsifying God's word. They're putting spin on it. They're being selective with it in some way, trying to win over people.

Paul says, I just speak truthfully and clearly and plainly the word of God. And that's linked to his next expression, the power of God. You see, the reason why Paul has got confidence simply to speak truthfully and plainly the word of God is that the power comes from God's word.

False teachers inevitably see power coming from themselves, from their rhetoric or their eloquence or their charisma. Not so for Paul. The power is in the word itself.

In one of the great famous passages of the New Testament, he made it clear in his earlier letter to the Corinthians when he said the gospel of the death of Christ, Christ crucified, might be weakness to our world but for God it is his power.

[16 : 43] And that's why he preaches Christ crucified so plainly because it's a powerful gospel. He's not looking for power in himself merely. He's a clay jar, remember, from chapter 4.

The power comes from the word of God preached clearly and straightforwardly. And that's also related to the last passage or part of this list in verse 7 as well.

Weapons of righteousness. For the right hand and the left. Later on in this letter in chapter 10 and we'll see this in a few weeks time Paul speaks there about waging war not according to human standards for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human but they have divine power to destroy strongholds.

We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God and we take every thought captive to obey Christ. The weapons of righteousness here is still the word of God.

In fact verse 7 in three different ways Paul is saying I preach the gospel of Christ alone. It is truthful speech it is the power of God they are weapons for righteousness.

[17 : 58] He's on about taking every thought the mind captive to produce in the lives of converts righteousness and that's of course the goal of the powerful gospel of the new covenant as we saw at the end of chapter 3 again changing us from one degree of glory to another so that in the presence of Christ we mirror the perfect righteousness of Christ.

Paul's defending himself but he's really defending the gospel of Christ that powerful word of the death of Christ as our substitute for sin.

Well the last group of nine things are contrasts. Probably the best way of understanding this is that Paul is saying I'm viewed one way by my opponents a worldly way of viewing me but by God and maybe by believers I'm viewed in a different way.

So he says in verse 8 my ministry is in honour and dishonour. That is there are people who don't pay him any honour at all. Ill repute is the next term.

But in God's eyes there is honour and good repute. By many I'm regarded as an imposter he says remember back in chapter 3 he said probably against an attack against him I don't need a letter of recommendation my ministry stands for itself don't think that a ministry a letter of recommendation is what validates ministry not at all.

[19 : 33] So I'm treated as an imposter by my opponents verse 8 continues and yet I'm true because I'm preaching the truthful word of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's no different today. Our world exalts and lifts up multi millionaires who can throw around what's called a racket after a bit of ball and think that they are the great celebrities that people look up to.

But actually the work of the gospel is despised in our world. It's ridiculed and thought lowly of. So be it. Our world's no different to every other world that's existed on earth.

Christian ministry is not going to be exalted and honoured by and large. Doesn't matter. Nor was Jesus. He was put to death. Why should it be different for his followers on earth?

On this same earth? He goes on with these contrasts in verse 9. As unknown and yet well known. Paul's a nobody really in the world but he's well known by God in the sense of being loved as well not just knowledge.

[20 : 41] As dying, well yes, he's a human being, he's dying but he's already made it clear that through these afflictions he's in effect carrying around death. He's come close to death on several occasions. And see he says we're alive.

And I don't think he's merely meaning, yeah I'm still living on earth, that sort of contrast. But actually his real life is in Christ. The resurrection's begun in his life as he made clear back in chapters 3 and 4.

As punished, well he's been punished many times, prisoned and so on, beatings, but yet not killed. That is, the value on my life, God's preserved my life.

Humans have sought to put it away. But the real value comes from God. I'm regarded as sorrowful because of all the sorrows, beatings, sufferings, afflictions that he's carried, and yet ironically and amazingly still rejoicing.

And we've seen that in this letter. I do not lose heart, he said twice in chapter 4. We have confidence in the gospel. So I'm rejoicing. He says I'm regarded as poor and on earthly standards he was.

[21 : 47] He was itinerant, he had no possessions, he was hungry at times, and yet making many rich. Because Paul knows that he may be a clay jar that is poor, but the treasure within is the gospel.

And so making many rich by the ministry of the gospel. That's the wealth that matters, that's the treasure that is worth pursuing. As he says at the end of verse 9, 10, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

you see how diametrically opposed the world's standards and views are to gods. The world laughs at the gospel, it ridicules it, it despises it, it ignores it, but it is actually the treasure of eternity, the life of eternity.

And what God thinks of the gospel and what God thinks of believers and what God thinks of Christian ministers, that is what matters in the end. And that's what Paul is defending here.

See, they're saying, oh, Paul, he looks so weak. I mean, people despise him, he goes to prison. I mean, why are you following somebody like that and what he teaches? Paul is saying that's the ministry of the suffering servant.

[22 : 56] If you want to follow Christ, then you pick up your cross. That's what I'm doing. It's valid. It's real. The power doesn't come from me. It comes from the gospel. He's defending himself because he's defending the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And he's urging them not to accept the grace of God in vain, not to be influenced by the world, not to be influenced by the false teachers. Indeed, Paul is trying to woo them back to himself.

He says in verse 11, we've spoken frankly with you, Corinthians, our heart is wide open to you. There's no restriction in our affections.

He loves them. He started that church. And despite everything, he still loves them. In fact, the restriction, he says, is only in your hearts. So in return, I speak to you as children because I'm your spiritual father.

I'm the one who started this church. Open wide your hearts. Now, Paul is not sad merely because he's lost a few friends here and feeling a bit lonely. Paul's sadness is that as they reject him, they're rejecting the gospel.

[23 : 59] So in urging them to open their hearts back to him, to restore healthy and loving and harmonious relationships, he's wooing them back to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's why he's saying these things.

That's why he's defending himself here. Now, as I've suggested, part of the Corinthian problem seems to be that they are still compromised in their practice of idolatry and immorality.

We see a glimpse of that back in 1 Corinthians. There is sexual immorality in the church and people are turning a blind eye and even condoning it. And several times in that letter, or at least twice in that letter, clearly, Paul says, flee idolatry.

And he deals at length with the issue of meat offered to idols. That's in 1 Corinthians. Remember that Corinth was a pagan city. There were temples and shrines. People would offer sacrifices.

They'd have celebratory meals. They'd invite their neighbours around and say, we're offering to Zeus today, come and join us for a meal to celebrate whatever the occasion was. And it was a polytheistic society.

[25 : 00] So you could worship Zeus and at the same time go over to Apollo and up on the hill, there was the temple for the goddess of love. So go up on Acrocorinth and worshiped there that day and it didn't matter. Lots of gods.

They're all there together. Great big team of gods. How radical Christianity is. One god. Monotheism. If you worship the god of the Bible, the father of the Lord Jesus Christ, if you worship the Lord Jesus Christ, then you can't sort of go off and worship Apollo and Diana and Zeus and Asclepius and all the others.

That is, worshipping God is to be exclusive. That's radical in a polytheistic world. And Paul recognises, I suppose, that it takes some getting used to if you're a Corinthian convert.

It actually affects your life in radical and deep ways. But it seems that these Corinthians are still in some ways engaging in idolatry, going to temples, maybe having meals with people who are offering sacrifices and so on.

And so he says to them, do not be mismatched with unbelievers. Now the level at which he's addressing that issue is perhaps teased out by the five rhetorical questions that follow.

[26 : 15] The answer to these questions is clear. Paul's not asking it for a little quiz, but simply rhetorically. What partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Well, Christians are meant to be righteous.

In fact, their righteousness comes from Christ by grace. They have nothing to do with lawlessness. They're completely separate. He goes on, what fellowship is there between light and darkness?

Well, none at all. They're polar opposites. The answer to the question is clear. What agreement does Christ have with Belial? Belial is another name for Satan.

It's a bit more common in this sort of period. Well, none at all. Again, they're the complete opposite, Satan and Christ. You wouldn't put them together at a tea party. Not at all. Fourth question he asks is what does a believer share with an unbeliever?

Or fundamentally nothing. That is, they belong to completely different worlds and realms. Paul's not advocating here that Christians should come out of the world, but he is advocating that they shouldn't be engaged in practices that compromise their exclusive relationship with God by engaging with unbelievers in various things.

[27 : 27] people. And so he says, what agreement has the temple of God with idols? Well, look around you in Corinth, there are several temples and shrines and so on, and they have nothing to do with the temple of the living God, which is not a building, of course, but the risen Lord Jesus and his people.

It's the church that is the temple of God, the people. Paul is saying here, you Corinthians have got to practice greater morality and fleeing from idolatry.

You're compromising your faith in what you're doing. He picks that up again at the end of this letter when he talks about the fact that they've not repented or turned from various actions of licentiousness and immorality and so on.

Paul is saying that you can't engage in pagan worship anymore. You can't just add in the living God to all the other Greco-Roman gods in your mantelpiece. Not at all.

There's certainly no place for a syncretistic view where you incorporate Christianity into the worship of other gods and there's no place for a multi-faith type worship, which is common today, sadly.

[28 : 36] Possibly an implication, I think, of what Paul is saying here is about marriage as well. Certainly it's often read that way. I don't think it's the fundamental thing that Paul is addressing, but it's certainly an implication.

Paul is saying, I think, in the strong rhetorical questions, there's no place for a believer to go and even marry an unbeliever. That would be a compromise of the exclusivity of your relationship with Almighty God.

In order to support his argument, Paul now quotes from some Old Testament verses, and the emphasis in them is exclusivity of relationship with God. If you are a believer in the living God, you have nothing to do with other gods and idols.

So he says in the end of verse 16, I will live in them and walk among them. I will be their God. They shall be my people. Now that sums up the Old Testament covenant.

It's expressed many times in the Old Testament. I will be their God. They will be my people. Not in a shared relationship, but in an exclusive one like marriage.

[29 : 44] Then he quotes from Isaiah again and Ezekiel. Therefore, come out from them and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean, then I will welcome you.

The context again is the end of the exile in Babylon, and he's calling them out of pagan Babylon back to the promised land. And the context of that in the Old Testament in the other books that relate to that period also clearly prohibits the marriage of Israelite believers in God with pagans.

And then it finishes in verse 18. I will be your father and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty. It's an exclusive relationship, and we do not have the liberty to practice a multi-faith sort of worship.

We don't have the liberty to worship idols on one day and God on a Sunday. The worship of God is exclusive and prohibits the worship of others.

That's what Paul is urging. And he finishes with the exhortation in chapter 7 verse 1. Since we have these promises that God will be our God and we will be his people, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.

[31 : 03] The fear of God relates to judgment day, as Paul made clear in earlier chapter, chapter 5. as we anticipate the judgment day, make holiness perfect.

Not that it will be our own strength because the power of such transformation is gospel power. That was clear at the end of chapter 3. That the power of the gospel of Jesus is changing us from one degree of glory into another so that we will be a mirror image of the perfect character of the Lord Jesus himself.

our response is to make holiness perfect, not to accept the grace of God in vain. What does that say to us?

We don't live in quite the same society as Corinth, but we live in just a pagan one, even if it's paganism is expressed in more secular ways. What compromises to our morality and to our worship of God have we fallen into that we need to flee and repent of?

What values of our world have we adopted, maybe subconsciously, that have led us to compromise our true allegiance to Almighty God? In every culture, Christians struggle with these issues.

[32 : 19] In every culture, Christians struggle with making holiness perfect. The influence of our culture, our society, our world, is insidious and strong.

And in Australia, the sort of secularism, paganism of our society is very strong indeed. It often stifles our costly discipleship.

What are the values for Christians of money, of time, of leisure, of family, career, security, comfort that we pursue that are in fact values of our society, but not values of the gospel?

The values of our wealthy world actually wear out Christian distinctiveness. Too often, our Christian lives are merely a mirror image of our society's lives with a thin veneer of Christian clothes over the top.

Our Christian lives are sort of pastel shades, really, of the world's colour. Slightly dimmed view of the world, but not that much different, really. what one writer has called hot tub Christianity is so common today.

[33 : 31] Comfortable, pleasurable Christianity that doesn't really challenge us. The sort of cucumber garden party variety that those in Istanbul might like to practice. You see, don't be fooled.

Making holiness perfect will not lift you up in the eyes of the world. Don't think that somebody who's got perfection down to a T, who's got holiness oozing out of their pores, is going to be esteemed in our world's view.

Hardly ever is that the case, nor should it be our aim for that to be so. Holiness perfected in our lives will not make us popular, it will not make us inoffensive, it will not be attractive in our world.

Paul practiced those things as he said back in verse 6, purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love. And what happened to him? Celebrity, top of the pops, TV adulation, flocks of sponsorship?

No, you see, that only happens to teenagers who wreck people's lives and parties and houses in our society. Not so for Paul, he was beaten, he was imprisoned, he faced riots, he suffered, he was hungry, he was homeless.

[34 : 48] But he was rejoicing and alive with the treasure of the gospel. The expatriate Anglicans of Istanbul seem to love their comfort too much and are not prepared to follow the path of the suffering Messiah Lord.

Don't be like them. It's all too tempting to be like that. Don't accept the grace of God in vain. make holiness perfect in your lives in the fear of the Lord.

But it will come at a cost. There will be suffering, opposition, affliction. But we are called to be different in this world. We are called to be like Jesus and not like our world.

Amen.