

# Living Paradox: Overflowing Grace

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now if you would take your bulletins and put them down please and pick up a Bible and turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 6 on page 966.

That would be just great. And can I ask, can you hear me? We've been trying to get the sound system right. Can the back half of the, I guess if they can't hear me they're not going to be able to signal are they?

Someone's waving at the back. Ushers, quickly to the back. You can? Thank you, that's great. I understand at the 9 o'clock nobody from about a third of the way back could hear.

Which is why I thought the sermon went so well. But it was... 2 Corinthians 6. One of the hardest things to get used to about the Christian faith is the fact that God serves us.

I think it's unique amongst world religions that we have a God who humbles himself and serves us and continues to service us, to serve us, to minister to us, minute by minute, hour by hour, throughout our lives.

[ 1 : 15 ] I think most religions have a way, a path of service where we serve God. We serve God. But only Christianity has a lowly, humble, painful, sacrificial man of sorrows at the center.

And when you are reconciled to that God, to the Christian God, what he does is he calls us to serve him by serving each other and serving his world.

But you'll never have any desire to serve him unless you first grasp that he's served you. That's why I wanted the last verse in chapter 5 to be read. You ever meditated on 2 Corinthians 5.21?

I think the first half of the verse, it takes us about a year or two after becoming Christian to get the first half of that verse right. You know, for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.

Forgiveness, forgiveness, forgiveness. But I'll tell you, I really struggle with the second half. So that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[ 2 : 19 ] If... This is for serving. If I don't understand that I am the righteousness of God, my serving will become trying to make myself righteous before God.

And the more I try and make myself righteous before God, the more disheartening that is. Or the more arrogance it produces. And I need to go back to this verse and meditate on it and meditate on it.

And chapter 5 is this beautiful... It's kind of like an act of praise where the Apostle Paul says, This is the power and pattern of Jesus serving you.

But as we come to our passage today, which is really verse 3 to 13 of chapter 6, Paul takes us inside what it is for us to serve Jesus.

It's nitty gritty. It's warts and all. And the trouble is that we have made the idea of serving and ministry, which is exactly the same word, by the way, in the Bible.

[ 3 : 19 ] Minister, servant, ministry, serving, exactly the same word. We've kind of made it religious. We've restricted it for the people who are theologically trained, professional, paid.

You know, like Dan, who we pay to do ministry, to do serving so that we don't have to. It's like the old joke about the clergy are paid to be good because the congregation can be good for nothing.

But before the word was dressed up in robes, this word simply meant in the New Testament doing anything that was helping others on a practical level. So originally it was used for waiting tables, preparing the food, setting the table, serving the food, clearing it away, cleaning it up.

That's ministry. It's also used for caring for someone who might be physically in need, disabled. You could be paid for it or it could be free.

It's usually manual. It's usually menial. It's often meaningful. And it's practical and helpful. And it's not reserved for one kind of Christian.

[ 4 : 32 ] You know this, don't you? I hope you know this. Just nod gently. This is not new news, is it? Well, all of this, of course, is based on the most astonishing reversal that Jesus Christ served us.

You know, when he came into this world, every breath, every word, every thought, every prayer, every deed of Jesus was done to serve us.

He says, I am among you as one who serves. And as he started to move towards the cross, he said, this is the purest form of service. He understood his dying on the cross as serving.

He said, look, I have not come to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many. And in that great dying on the cross, where he's made sin for us and we are made righteousness, we have the power and the pattern of ministry.

And when God raises him from the dead and exalts him to the right hand, God institutes a totally new and different way of human relationships, which shows the status quo in the world is wrong.

[ 5 : 44 ] And it's not going to be overthrown by violence and plotting, but by ordinary Christians subversively serving. And as we subversively serve, we have this privilege of bringing a new world to be, a world where things are the way they're supposed to be.

Because our lives flow directly out of the serving of Jesus and it's shaped by his serving. Now, why am I saying all this? Well, it's because our passage is dominated by a double reference to ministry serving in verses three and four.

If you look down, Paul talks about our ministry, our serving. We're trying to commend ourselves in every way. He's come out of chapter five with his high sense of privilege.

Remember, God reconciles the world through Christ. God makes his appeal through us. And you get this astonishing phrase at the beginning of chapter six, working together with him, we appeal to you.

Working together with God. It's not that we work for God. It's not that God gives us some help in that. It's actually we're co-workers. We're collaborators with God. And the Corinthian church has not grasped the upside downness of all this.

[ 7 : 03 ] You see, they want the power of Jesus serving, but they don't want the pattern of his serving. They see faith as a sort of a formula to unlock God's bank.

They've got a hold of one end of the stick, but they don't want the other. You know, they want power. They don't want weakness. They want healing. They don't want suffering. It's perfectly understandable. They want ruling, but not serving.

They want resurrection, but no dying. Thank you very much. But if you just have a hold of that end of the stick, all you're doing is you're aiding and abetting the status quo. But you don't have any power to change or help anyone.

Because in the death of Jesus, we have both the power and the pattern for change and for serving. That's why Paul takes us inside the practicalities of what it means to serve.

And the way he does it is by lists. Lists. Now, I don't know if you're a list writer. When you read the Bible, when you come across a list, you know what you should do?

[ 8 : 10 ] Slow down. Look at it in detail. It's not a list of trivial things. One of my brothers-in-law, who shall remain nameless, loves the book of lists.

Which, you know, hundreds of lists of obscure topics and facts. Like the worst places in the world to hitchhike. Or all the people who Ronald Reagan misquoted.

Or the breeds of dog which are most likely to bite you. And the problem with being with my brother-in-law is these come up in conversation all the time.

I just think, just let's get on to something more important. However, one of St John's wardens told me about a book called The Checklist Manifesto.

Lists are making a big comeback. This is a New York Times bestseller, How to Get Things Right. And it's an elegantly written book, evidently, about how checklists help improve things over time and toward the future.

[ 9 : 18 ] Well, Paul shows us the pattern and power of Jesus serving. And he gives us three little lists. Well, it's actually one long list. But there's three sections in the list. And then an appeal. So I've got four points this morning.

I can't remember the last time I had a four-point sermon. Four points, and they all begin with E.

These are the four necessities for Christian serving in practical outline.

And the first is endurance in verses 4 to 5. Look at the second half of verse 4. So as servants, we are trying to commend ourselves in every way by great endurance.

And then comes a list of nine really difficult circumstances that you would never find in a recruiting ad. And if you're not a Christian, any one of them would make you think twice about being a Christian.

And together they might make you give up. But this word endurance is a wonderful word. It literally means to stay under. Because it's one thing to serve others when they're very attractive and you're getting something in return.

[10:31] What about if you're suffering or they're hostile or you've got opposition? But you see, endurance comes from Jesus because it's God who gives shape to our serving.

We don't define it. It flows out of the shape of what Jesus has done. And so Paul gives us these nine circumstances in three lots of three. The first three are general and cover all Christians.

And there's a progression through the first three set of circumstances. Affliction, hardship, calamity. And they go from wide to narrow. Affliction is any sort of pressure you experience.

Hardship is like disasters, like the table falling over in Sunday school. Or calamities. Calamity literally means you're confined to a narrow space and there's no way out.

So these are hardships in life that move toward a place where you can't see a way around and you can't see a way over. You have to go through it. And what you need to go through is endurance.

[11:37] Staying under. The next three are from Paul's own life. Beatings, imprisonments, riots. There are not many at St. John's who've been through that.

Some have. The last three are self-imposed hardships that the apostle chooses for the sake of serving. Labor's, sleepless nights, hunger.

He's not giving away his sleep to make money and get ahead. He's working to serve others. Doing this. You're doing this.

Trying to serve others runs counter to what's natural for us. I mean, we just, we want to take the easy path. Choosing to stay under difficult circumstances is what Christ did because you can't, you can't peel off being a servant when you go home.

It has to do with who we are. And the apostle is doing this and talking to us about this because we have the ministry of reconciliation between God and each other.

[12:39] And he wants to remove all the obstacles that come to that reconciliation. He's well aware of his weaknesses and his failings. He doesn't want his weaknesses to get in the way of God pouring out his grace to other people.

So he tries and works to commend himself. He's not gritting it out, you know, he's not gutting it out. And the reason for that is that this pattern, which is Jesus' pattern, is the place of God's power.

Because God's power is made perfect in our weakness. It's right in the middle of the difficulty of our circumstances. This is the pattern of Christians serving.

It's very helpful, isn't it? The Christian faith is not a kind of an activator to unleash spiritual power.

It's in the first case surrendering to the great service that Jesus gives us, despite how difficult it was for him.

And then it's serving him through everything, staying under all the circumstances he brings into our life. It's not the absence of pain. It's not the presence of miracles. It's staying faithful and humble and enduring.

[13:51] And that's the first necessity for Christians serving. It's endurance. The second is a little happier. And it's empowerment. Verses 6 to 7.

If you just cast your eyes over those, there are another nine qualities of how we serve. And each of these is a quality of character that God works in his servants.

The big surprise is right in the middle of them, in verse 6, Paul mentions the Holy Spirit. So these are not natural personality traits.

It's not that some of us are loving and some of us are patient and long-suffering. These don't rise from within us. They don't come from moral exercise. They come from God.

This is very important. As we serve in difficulty. Let me say that again. I think a lot of people think that these qualities, these fruit of the Spirit, will suddenly get them when we're praying and then we'll be able to do stuff.

[14:52] It doesn't work like that. We get these things as we serve and as we serve in difficulty. And I love the fact that the Apostle puts the Holy Spirit in the middle.

It's not the first on the list and it's not the last on the list. It's right in the middle because that's where the Holy Spirit is. He's right in the middle of our circumstances all the time. These things don't just

drop out of the sky.

They come as we serve. And the difficult circumstances, they don't form these things in us. They can do the opposite. But they need to be there for these things.

For example, take patience. Verse 6.

You can only develop patience when someone has wronged you. The word literally means choosing to defer anger. It means you've been deliberately insulted or you've been injured and you're choosing not to be easily provoked or not to take vengeance.

[15:59] You can't get that unless someone's hurting you. Genuine love, truthful speech. This is the power of God in our lives. It's so attractive and compelling, I find in other people, when they love me without gaining something from me.

When they're patient and long-suffering with me. But tell me the truth. That's why there's a specific pattern of Christians serving.

You see, God has given us a message. And God has given us a ministry. And we are not the message. We carry the message in clay pots.

But there has to be a broad consistency between the message and the messenger. We have to begin to be being transformed by the message. And that's vital for Christians serving.

Because you see, the great act of Christian serving has already been done for us. The death and resurrection of Jesus. He's going to continue to serve us day by day.

[17:09] And his power is more than enough to change us to become like him. And do you remember at the end of chapter 3, we talked about the transformation that comes as we meditate on him.

As we gaze on the Lord Jesus Christ, we are transformed into his glory. Do you know, the original writers of the Book of Common Prayer called our gathering on Sundays divine service a number of times.

But the divine service was not because the idea was that we would come to church to serve God here. It's the opposite. We come and God serves us here.

That's why we meet. We meet together to be reminded of the great truths of the faith. Of the death and resurrection of Christ. To sing and empower each other and pray together. It's divine service.

That's the focus of what we are doing. So here are two necessities. Endurance and empowerment.

And the third, verses 8 to 10, is exchange.

[18:13] This is a very interesting list of contrasts. And it shows how subversive Christians serving in and how God turns everything upside down. Basically, it's about how God reverses horizontal judgments for his own vertical judgment.

Because on the one side of these horizontal judgments, they're negative assessments of Christians from those who are not Christians, who like the status quo, about you if you're crazy enough to live a life serving Jesus.

And on the other hand, are God's evaluations. All of which reverse those horizontal evaluations.

Because he exchanges what is genuinely painful but incredibly superficial for what is deep and lasting and joyful.

And at the heart of this list is the one in verse 9 where Paul says, This is one of those little big Bible words, behold.

It's from the command to look. I'm not going to yell it out. Look. And it comes when God does something that is so surprising and so defying of human hope and expectation.

[19:27] So I just went through a Gospel of Matthew and picked out a few. When Jesus is born, the angel says, Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. When he's baptized, the heavens open and a voice, we read, Behold, a voice from heaven speaks and says, This is my son in whom I'm well pleased.

When he dies on the cross, we read, Behold, the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. And when he's raised from the dead, behold, he meets with his disciples. And when he ascends into heaven, he says, Behold, I'm with you always.

Well, here in this little verse here, verse 9, We have, we are dying, yet behold, look at this, we live. I don't think he's talking about physical death here.

He's talking about the pattern of Christian serving, how we choose to die a thousand times a day to ourselves and to our pleasure and to our luxury or to our ease. We give ourselves, we choose to give ourselves over to death.

And behold, we live. And we live is one word in the Greek, and it is the main verb of the entire passage. We live. This is the reality that lies underneath all the other exchanges.

[ 20 : 42 ] This is the power of God and the pattern of God at work in our daily lives as we try and serve. As we die, as we give away our life, he gives it back.

As we choose to go low, he lifts us up. As we mourn, he brings us comfort. As we're poor in spirit, he gives us the kingdom. As we hunger and thirst for righteousness, he satisfies us.

That's why we can't separate the pattern of Christian ministry from the power of Christian ministry. And do you know how you know when you are separating them? You know you're separating them when you're starting to listen to the horizontal judgments.

So, for example, you get angry if no one's noticing your ministry, noticing how well you're serving. Or if someone comes in and does it better than you, you resent them.

Or you fret because you've not been well properly thanked for your serving. And heaven help the person who tries to take away your position of serving.

[ 21 : 51 ] But you know what really matters is God's evaluation. Verse 10, we're regarded as sorrowful but we're always rejoicing. There's real pain and there's sorrow.

In fact, I think you can't serve without aching for people. There's grief. But the joy is inextinguishable. Because our joy is in the person of Jesus Christ who's risen from the dead. No one's... He's very secure. And he comforts us in our sorrows and he'll never leave us. Behold, he'll never leave us or forsake us. Or just one more.

As poor but making many rich. I love this. I think that's the best description of Christian ministry in the New Testament. Paul was literally poor.

He chose not to receive money from the Corinthian congregation. A very dangerous precedent in my book. I'm kidding.

[ 22 : 50 ] It's a wonderful precedent. So that he could preach the gospel and say anything he liked. But he chose to be literally... He didn't need to. I mean, he was a very qualified guy. So that he could give away the incredible eternal treasure of the riches of Jesus Christ.

To preach the gospel free. And it's this exchange, you see, which is the pattern of Christian ministry. So it involves endurance and empowerment and exchange.

And finally, the fourth and the best heading of all. It involves enlargement of the heart. I'm sorry. It's not a very good heading.

But it's the only E word I could think of. And I'm thinking of verses 11 to 13. We've spoken to you freely, Corinthians. Our heart is open wide. You're not restricted by us.

You're restricted in your own affections. In return, I speak as to children. Widen your hearts also. So an enlarged heart in medical terms means there's a problem going on somewhere else in your life.

[ 23 : 54 ] In spiritual terms, it's essential. And it means things are right in your life. And a widened heart in Christian terms is not sentiment. It's not feeling nice about other people.

It's actually being open to engage with other people and serving them. Not for the sake of serving, but because you've been caught up in this great reconciling thing that God is doing.

And through us, he's reconciling us to each other. It's a beautifully candid and honest moment, isn't it? He turns to the Corinthians. He puts himself at risk.

And he says, look. He doesn't say, come on, be fair. I've loved you. You should, you know. Where's the love? Give me some back. He's saying, I hope and pray that the gospel is going to change you so that you live a life of serving.

But if there's going to be real reconciliation, there has to be a will on both sides. You know that, don't you? Reconciliation doesn't just happen automatically when one person wants it to happen.

[ 24 : 58 ] It comes when both parties have the humility to surrender to the judgment of God. This is very important because it is possible to have Christians in our lives who we're not reconciled with.

As long as we've done all that we can. The Apostle Paul says in Romans, live at peace with all people so long as it depends on you. That means we can't take responsibility for horizontal reconciliation.

But we can take responsibility to see there's no narrowing in my heart. To remove all the obstacles from my side. To seek forgiveness.

To be willing to deal with any sin that I've contributed. To humble ourselves under the hand of mighty God. So here are four necessities to serving Jesus.

Endurance. Empowerment. The exchange of God's judgment. And enlarge hearts. And I thought the children's time this morning was brilliant.

[ 26 : 10 ] I love the idea of painting ourselves brokenly like that. The thing about it is though that there's change that goes on.

And we can resist it. And let me tell you some things I hear from people. I hear people say, I like the status quo. Things are good. I know it's superficial.

I've got plenty of time before I get seriously serving Jesus. I hear people say, I used to serve but nobody really recognized my contribution.

So I'm taking a back seat until my wounds heal. Other things I hear are, there are so many able people around me. There's nothing I can really do.

Another is, I'm not currently experiencing God's grace in my life. So how can I give it away to others? Well, of course. You experience it as you give it away to others.

[ 27 : 08 ] I hear this too. I'm just too spiritually weak and broken to be of any help. I'm not good enough for Jesus. I need to get my life together before I serve him.

Go back to 521. Another one is, I don't know what my gift is. I'm waiting to be discovered. I'm waiting for someone to ask me to do something specific. Well, Jesus said to a woman who had poured expensive ointment over his feet, she's done what she could.

And I don't think God expects us to do more than any of us are able to. And wouldn't it be great on the last day if he welcomes us and says, well done, good and faithful servant.

You've done what you could. It might be a little. It might be a great deal. But what about you? Are you doing what you can?

Let's kneel for prayer.