

THE PROOF IS IN THE SCARS

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-10

We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

When men get together, one of their favorite pastimes is comparing each other's scars. At a CC Men's Retreat if you've got a gnarly scar to show off you become an instant celebrity. Nasty-looking scars are definitely cool.

Around the world, and over the centuries, physical scars have served as badges of honor or manliness.

In ancient Rome when a man was running for the Senate, it was not uncommon, on the campaign stump, for him to pull back his tunic, and show off his scars.

His scars were a big part of the man's credentials. Smooth skin was considered a public embarrassment.

A combat wound, or a scar incurred on a risky journey, or in dangerous work earned respect and gained votes.

Remember the Greek classics you had to read in High School - the Iliad and Odyssey by Homer. If you were as studious as me, you probably read the Cliff Notes.

But the story is told of Odysseus, the legendary king of Ithaca... As a boy he had gone hunting with some older men. They were on a mountain slope when suddenly an angry boar emerged from a thicket. A bold Odysseus was the first to throw his spear at the boar. He missed, and the animal gored him just above the knee.

Undeterred, Odysseus retrieved his spear and ran it through the boar. Afterwards, his uncles prepare the carcass, and bandage up the young man's wounds.

His first official hunt revealed the courage that would later make him a great general. Odysseus returned home with a big scar on his leg and a bigger story to tell.

Fast forward many years, Odysseus had been away fighting battles. Upon his return home he kept his identity hidden. He pretended to be a beggar while he tried to sort out if his wife, Penelope, had stayed faithful, and which of his subordinates had tried to usurp his throne.

At one point, Penelope, still not knowing his true identity, asks her lifelong servant to wash the beggar's feet. As he puts his feet in the basin, her maid notices the hunting scar above his knee. She reacts instantly, **"My child, I am sure you must be Odysseus himself..."**

The scar that originally proved the young Odysseus' courage, was also the defining mark that revealed his true identity... *And this was the case with Paul's scars...*

Remember there were Corinthians who doubted Paul. They questioned the legitimacy of his apostleship.

How could a man who suffered like Paul, be a true servant of God? Surely, God takes care of His servants better than the treatment Paul received. If he were a man of God he'd prosper and enjoy smooth sailing - live trouble-free. But Paul says just the opposite was true.

Paul was confronted over and over by harsh trials that had proven his commitment and courage - and now those scars were the evidence of God's calling. All the suffering Paul endured for the Gospel's sake, *his scars if you will*, were what identified him as a servant of Christ.

The proof of his ministry was his scars!

Chapter 6 begins, **"We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain."** In Chapter 5 Paul talked about our ministry. *If you want to have a meaningful ministry look no further... We all have "the ministry of reconciliation."*

You and I have the job of putting *the hand of men in the hand of God*. We're exchange agents... swapping *life for*

death, light for darkness, pardon for guilt, purity for perversion, salvation for sinfulness - to sum it up, reconciliation with God for alienation from God.

We're working together with God in His efforts to reconcile the world. Recall the poignant way Paul put it in Chapter 5, "God was in Christ dying to save the world, now God is in us pleading for men to be saved."

And don't you love what Paul calls us, "*worker's together with Him*"? Realize, when we serve the Lord no one ever just works for Jesus, we work with Him.

A big part of serving the Lord is not just what we accomplish, but the opportunity to do it with Jesus.

As we serve, He leads us, empowers us, enlightens us. We learn His ways. We get to know Jesus.

And here in verse 1 Jesus "*pleads*" with and through Paul, to the Corinthians, "*not to receive the grace of God in vain.*" He tells them don't just receive God's grace without growing in that grace. Take advantage of the favor, access, and blessings God's grace provides!

It's always striking that we can waste God's grace.

That spiritually famished folks like us can leave a delicious, healthy meal on the table, without a nibble.

Imagine, losing your debit card while there's still money in the bank... Having presents in heaven with your name on them, that sit unopened... Fighting spiritual battles with bullets still left in your gun...

Don't waste grace! God's gifts are free - His truth, love, wisdom, power, peace, joy... But we have to have the faith to

draw them out! Too many of us are standing on the dock, while seats remain empty on the boat.

It reminds me of the Titanic. When the ocean liner that couldn't be sunk started sinking, it had multiple lifeboats onboard that were certified to hold a total of 1,178 people. Yet only 711 passengers and crew survived. Lifeboat #1 had room for 40 people, but when rescuers arrived, there were only 12 survivors onboard.

Tragically, 40% of the lifeboat seats were empty. Nearly half of the rescue space went to waste.

And this is NOT what Paul wants to see happen with God's kindness and grace! All of God's favor and blessing was paid for on the cross of Jesus. To waste His grace means the blood of Jesus was spilt in vain.

It's one thing to be beneficiaries of God's grace, but don't let it just sit in the bank - make daily withdrawals.

To help you forgive... to get strength for temptation... to endure... to enjoy His peace - tap into God's grace.

Verse 2 quotes Isaiah 49:8, "For He says: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

Not next month - or even the next moment - but now is the time to receive God's grace and be reconciled to Him. The peak season for salvation is right now!

Keep in mind salvation is a seasonal business.

Like beach chairs and Christmas ornaments there're only certain times of the year when products get sold.

And the same is true of salvation. In the millions and zillions of years on God's cosmic calendar, the only time God will be zeroed in on reconciling a lost humanity is right now. *"Now is the day of salvation..."*

When time ends and eternity begins you'll be unable to obtain salvation. Today though, *the shelves are stocked - business is brisk. In fact, God needs help behind the counter!* That's why he's recruited you!

I use to work in a grocery store, and there was a rule... If customers were stacking up at the registers, even if you were on break, or at lunch, you got back to work immediately. *We never made the customers wait.*

This is why today God is calling all His people to come to the front of the store! We're *"ministers of reconciliation, ambassadors for Christ."* We've got customers checking out. They need to get the gospel.

And when I talk about the day *"time ends and eternity begins,"* I'm not just speaking of the day yet future, at the end of the age, when Jesus returns.

Time ends and eternity begins every day for 151,600 people on planet Earth. Imagine this, every hour a total of 6,316 people die and meet their Maker. That means 9000 people will die during this Sunday AM's service.

Right this second, folks all over the globe are checking out, and they desperately need Jesus.

You hear a lot of talk these days about “near-death experiences.” Folks see bright lights and walk down long tunnels... Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but that's not what you're going to see when you die. *Near-death experiences aren't really-dead experiences.*

Author C.S. Lewis describes what you'll see the first moment you die, "There will be God without disguise: something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature.

It will be too late then to choose your side. That will not be the time for choosing: it will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen, whether we realized it or not. Now, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It won't last forever. *We must take it or leave it.*" This is why now is the day of salvation.

Everyone to the check-outs! We've got customers!

And in verse 3 Paul explains that this is why he takes his ministry so deadly seriously. "We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed." Paul doesn't want to do anything to discredit the Gospel.

The message Paul preached was a lifeline to men and women - he wanted them to know its trustworthy.

Sadly though, some ministries do more harm than good. They're too pushy, or too slick, or too self-promoting. They come across hypocritical. They try to pressure and manipulate people. They turn folks off.

The Gospel of Jesus reveals our sin and confronts us to repent - *it offends by its very nature.* That's why **we should**

never offend anyone unnecessarily.

Yesterday I was coming home on the airplane, and talking to a lady sitting next to me, I asked her if she was a Christian. She smiled and said she was!

Then I ask her what church she attended. She said she didn't. *She'd been turned off by unkind Christians.*

We agreed "the number one reason people become a Christian is another Christian, and the number one reason they don't is another Christian." *Guard hard* against offending anyone unless it's with the Gospel.

Genuine kindness is what folks need to see.

And this is why Paul was so vigilant about his ministry, "But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God..." Rather than *offend*, Paul *commends* himself as a minister. He wanted to hold himself up as an example of faithful service to God.

This should be the goal of every church and pastor. Not to promote itself, or brag about its achievements, but to do ministry with the kind of integrity that stands up under the world's scrutiny. A church that doesn't pay its bills, or mistreats people, harms the cause of Christ.

Here at Calvary Chapel we want to conduct both the business-side and ministry-side of what we do, in a way that witnesses to outsiders, and encourages the saints. *This is how Paul conducted his ministry.*

But this is easier said than done! Apply *the stresses of ministry, the attacks of the enemy, the uncertainties of life, the*

opposition of the world - then suddenly being an example of godly ministry is a real challenge.

The typical church member doesn't realize the sacrifices, difficulties, and obstacles a pastor faces.

Pastor James served as an elder at CCSM for nearly a decade before he came on staff as Assistant Pastor.

Every Monday he and I ate lunch, and I spilled the beans on the state of our ministry. If anybody should've known what was going on it would've been James.

But I'll never forget a few months after he came on staff, he confessed, "**Sandy, I had no idea what all you go through. I thought I did, but I didn't.**" And the Corinthians didn't realize all that Pastor Paul endured.

It's been said, "**A ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing.**" And in the remaining verses of our text Paul itemizes the price he'd paid in ministry...

He speaks of his intense trials, his deepest principles, and even his most puzzling challenges...

In verses 4-10 Paul lists 28 issues that impacted his ministry. He mentions **the pressures in his ministry, the priorities by which he carried out his ministry, and some paradoxes he discovered as he did ministry...**

10 pressures. 11 priorities. 7 paradoxes. And with the time I have left I want to talk about the price Paul paid for the Gospel... *For the time may come, when you and I are called to make the same expenditures.*

Paul begins in verse 4, with **pressures in** ministry.

One of the early church fathers referred to pressures Paul lists as “the blizzard of troubles.” Paul starts with a quartet of difficulties, followed by a trio of hostilities, followed by Paul’s own responsibilities - three of them.

Here are his difficulties, verse 4, “In much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses” Wow, this is a huge understatement - **ministry requires “patience.”**

Actually, Paul says it best, “*much patience.*”

According to the parable of the sower. The seed fell on four kinds of soil... Before we built this building I thought all dirt was created equal. But not so, dirt comes in different varieties and rates of percolation.

And Jesus said of the four soil-types he mentions, only one receives the seed... Of course, the seed is God’s Word. The soil is human hearts. And the sower is you and I. When we share or live out our faith we’re sowing seed, *but it takes time!* Only one in four people are ready to receive. That’s why we need patience for folks to come around, and persistence in our sharing.

Just be glad, that before you were saved, the people in your life didn’t give up on you. They had patience.

This is why Paul said to the Galatians, “Let us not grow weary while doing good.” He says in Hebrews 6, “through faith and patience we inherit God’s promises.”

Not just faith - not just patience - but the combination of both faith and patience is what receives from God.

Paul also mentions “*tribulations*” - the Greek word is

“thilipsis” which means “to compress or restrict.” At times in ministry the collar tightens. Stakes get high.

Christian ministry often comes in pressure packed situations. *Someone has a question about God... A depressed person is looking for answers... a struggling couple are hoping for a word that'll save their marriage.*

A pastor is like a field goal kicker... and it's always the fourth quarter, and the score is always tied, and there're always three seconds left on the clock, and it's always the most strategic game. *There's some tension.*

This is what Paul endured for the Gospel's sake.

As well as “*in needs...*” Wow, that's an open ended phrase - “needs” plural. You get the impression Paul considered himself needy in multiple ways - *physically, spiritually, economically, socially, medically...*

He needed money for support, healing for his eyes, a job in his next town, friends to travel with him and offer help... not to mention the spiritual insight to guide the Church and the physical stamina to endure the trials.

Here's the golden rule in ministry... *we're always trying to meet unlimited needs with limited resources.*

And this is what keeps us trusting in God and not in ourselves. You're always throwing your meagerness at the problem and trusting God to do something mighty. It's our *neediness* that keeps us on our *knees-no-less*.

And then there's “*distresses.*” Paul ministered “*in distresses.*” The Greek term is a compound word that when translated, literally means, “close spaces.” The word could be

translated “*close calls or near misses.*”

Here’s an apt description of ministry. It’s a life of close calls and near misses. Victory or defeat, success or failure often gets decided by a razor thin margin.

You believe and God comes through in the nick-of-time. You’re tempted, but He provides a way of escape. You’re going under, then God delivers out of the blue.

Again, God always ups the ante in ministry, so we’ll never drift far from our dependence on Him.

But then he lists three more pressures or **hostilities**...

“*In stripes*” - In Chapter 11 Paul says he was beaten five times with 39 lashes. On three more occasions he was flogged with Roman rods. Like a Timex watch, the Apostle Paul took a licking and kept on ticking.

“*In imprisonments*” - notice the plural. We know about Philippi where Paul and Silas were beaten, locked up, and ended up praising God at midnight. Yet obviously, Paul spent more jail time than we find in the book of Acts. Incarceration was no stranger to Paul.

And “*in tumults*” - Paul was the source of riots in Lystra, in Thessalonica, in Ephesus, even in Corinth. In the city of Thessalonica his enemies referred to him as the man who “*turned the world upside down.*”

Imagine, a pastor applying to CC. He says he’s a man of God... *And I ask him to list his qualifications...*

That’s when he lifts up his shirt to show the criss-crossed stripes on his back. He brings up his extensive prison record, and says he’s often the flashpoint for riots! *Does this guy*

really think he's pastor material? Hey, we want a peacemaker not a troublemaker!

But that might be more an insight into our watered down criteria; than a reflection on the pastor. Like Paul it was said of Jesus, **“He comforted the disturbed, and disturbed the comfortable.”** I believe any pastor who preaches God's Word - *may not cause riots* - but He'll definitely step on some toes. He'll be a firebrand.

And hopefully we'll thankful when he does.

And then Paul mentions a trio of self-assumed **responsibilities** that added pressure to his ministry.

He writes, **“In labors”** - Paul worked long and hard. He was a work-horse in spreading the Gospel. Paul was a bi-vocational pastor in most of the cities he visited. He made tents by day and preached at night.

“In sleeplessness” - There're only 24 hours in a day and some days a pastor gets his extra hours by forfeiting some slumber. A pastor's life is full of late nights. If you want to put in 40 hours a week, and leave your work at the office, then please don't be a pastor!

And **“in fastings”** - Denying the flesh to focus on God is a discipline Paul and all pastors need to cultivate.

In verse 6, Paul shifts gears. A genuine Christian ministry will have eleven **priorities**, and Paul begins...

“By purity” - pure motives, a pure heart, a pure love, pure thoughts - these are marks of a pure ministry.

“By knowledge” - a genuine Christian ministry values the knowledge of God. If you don't know God, and walk in a

relationship with Him, you have no business representing Him. Jeremiah 9 tells us, “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches, but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD...” The person who knows and fears God has nothing else to fear.

“By long-suffering” - As we've said, Christian ministry requires patience and endurance. It takes stick-to-it-ness. The Greek word here is “macro-thymos” - not just endurance, but “great (macro) endurance.” When you think you're at the end of your rope, pray for “great endurance.” God will help you hold on a little longer.

“By kindness” - It's said, “People won't care what you know, until they know that you care.” A true witness for Jesus offers more than words. He holds out a helping hand. He or she advances the Gospel by kindness.

And *“by the Holy Spirit”* - Everything done for God of deep and permanent value comes by the Holy Spirit.

“By sincere love” - not sappy, syrupy, phony love, but *“sincere love.”* True love never quits. It never gives up. A true Christian leader never quits on people.

“By the Word of truth” - Here is the firepower of Christian ministry - the Scriptures. Your Bible is no ordinary book. It's living and powerful. It works miracles and changes lives. It cuts to the heart. It's food for the soul. It's the hammer than has broken many anvils.

And *“by the power of God”* - again, the Holy Spirit. The term

“power” is the Greek word *“dunamis”* from which we get *“dynamic or dynamite.”* This is what the Spirit of God brings to a Christian’s ministry - against-all-odds power - miracle-working power. True Christian ministry will have evidence of supernatural power.

“By the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left...” Righteousness - a right standing with God - and a twisted life that's been made right - keep the devil from condemning us and tempting us.

Again, Paul is listing the marks of a faithful ministry.

He says, *“By honor and dishonor”* - and a pastor gets his share of both. It’s odd how people treat me when I tell them I’m a pastor. Some folks show me an instant respect, while others show me a obvious disdain. A true minister will be identified *“by honor and dishonor”*...

And *“By evil report and good report...”* Up against our pluralistic, anti-Christian, politically correct culture, the Bible is becoming increasingly confrontational.

It’s impossible for me to stand up here weekly, and teach the Bible truthfully without ruffling some feathers.

Not a week goes by I don't make somebody mad.

Every message I preach ends in a split decision. Some folks call it a *good report* - others *an evil report*.

Remember, this discussion in Chapter 6 isn’t Paul tooting his own horn. The Corinthians have questioned him and the legitimacy of God’s calling on his life.

He just wants his friends in Corinth to know what he’s

endured *for their sake* and *for Jesus' sake*. Like all of us, Paul wants to be respected, and appreciated.

And I have to tell you I know how Paul feels.

Been there, don't that, and got the T-shirt. The toughest times in ministry are when folks criticize what they see, while you're making sacrifices they can't see.

It's hard on a pastor when people don't trust his heart, or appreciate his efforts, or realize there's more to the story than what they know. *Why don't they give the pastor the benefit of the doubt?* This blind criticism isn't right - it's not fair - *but neither was Calvary's cross.*

Early in our ministry I was getting criticized by a group in our church. I went to see my dad for advice.

I spilled my guts, "Dad, you'd think after 13 years of faithfulness I wouldn't have to keep proving myself."

I'll never forget my dad's reply, "Sandy, in this world, you *have got to prove yourself to people every day!*"

And that's true. Paul didn't have to prove himself to Jesus, but here he's proving his sincerity to the Corinthians. He wants them to trust their pastor.

Then Paul lists seven **paradoxes** he'd experienced in his ministry - *which have been felt by all pastors...*

"As deceivers, and yet true..." Not only does a pastor teach, he's also been called by God to lead. Those who like his direction believe he's sincere and seeking God. Those who don't like where he's headed conclude he's a phony. But every decision he makes is met with controversy of some sort

from somebody.

He's treated *"as deceiver, and yet true..."*

"As unknown, and yet well known..." Everybody knows I'm "Pastor Sandy"... but they forget I'm Kathy's "honey" - I'm "dad" to seven kids - I'm "G-daddy" to seven grandkids - and I'm even a "pastor" to pastors.

Everybody knows I'm *"Pastor Sandy,"* but few people remember I've got a life outside of what I do for them.

I'm *well known, yet unknown...*

Here's another paradox, *"As dying, and behold we live..."* We die to our pride, our selfishness, our self-interest - while at the same time God's life and joy and love and power swell up inside us! We're fully alive!

We die and lay down our lives in so many ways, yet God fills us with life like we've never lived before!

"As chastened, and yet not killed..." God allows the pastor to be disciplined. He teaches us hard lessons. We go through tough times. *God spans His pastors.*

But as the old saying goes, *"what doesn't kill him makes him stronger."* *Another of a pastor's paradoxes.*

And verse 10, *"As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing..."*

Every pastor realizes that ministry is a rollercoaster. It's full of highs and lows. One week folks get saved, there's a great offering - *all is well!* The next week the crowd is down, people complain - *what happened?*

A pastor can get his heart broken by a person he trusted,

then literally seconds later have the joy of leading a person to Christ. You've got to persist.

Here's another paradox, "**As poor, yet making many rich...**" For years, CCSM has done *a lot with a little*.

Compared to other churches our same size at times we've been "**poor,**" yet we've made folks spiritually rich by passing out biblical treasures week after week.

And the last paradox, "**As having nothing, and yet possessing all things.**" A bank account can be near zero, but spiritual deposits can always be made in heaven by serving the Lord. What an irony, a believer in Jesus can be *broke* and *blessed* at the same time.

This was the paradox for most of Adonirum Judson's life. "**As having nothing, and yet possessing all things.**"

Judson pioneered Christian missions in Burma in the early 1800s. But his efforts weren't immediately appreciated. For his first seven years in Burma he failed to see a single person converted to Christianity.

He was eventually thrown in prison.

And talk about "having nothing"... The small cell Judson occupied had one tiny window at ground level.

Every day, his wife Anne, brought him food to eat that she had to hand to her husband through the bars.

One day, Anne told Adonirum she had received a letter from their English supporters. The Christians back home wanted to know what the Judson's needed.

You can imagine what their list could've included.

Their situation was desperate and they had so many needs... But without hesitation, Judson replied, "Tell them to send a communion set. We're going to need it someday." Neither prison - nor seven years without a convert - nor countless setbacks dampened his faith.

He had nothing, yet lived as "*possessing all things.*"

During his time in prison, he was kept in leg-irons and handcuffs which scarred his wrists and ankles.

Upon his release, Judson asked the King to grant him permission to preach Jesus to the Burmese. The king replied, "My people are not fools enough to listen to what a missionary might say, but I fear they might be impressed by your scars and turn to your religion."

Eventually, his scars and the Gospel he preached won over the Burmese. Today, half-a-million Christians trace their salvation to the scars and faith of Adoniram Judson. The proof of his ministry was in his scars.

And this is what Paul is saying in our text. His critics were silenced **in the pressures** he faced, **by the priorities he kept**, and **as the paradoxes unfolded**.

And this provides us instruction on how to *judge ministries* and *weigh pastors*. Looking for outward, physical signs of success is deceptive. *Peer deeper...*

Often the proof of a man's ministry is in his scars.