

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Reward of Costly Service

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 5-7)

"All In" for the Ministry of Reconciliation

Study #3

(2 Corinthians 6:1-13)

Introduction: Fence-sitting, 101...

There are few figures of speech in the English language as graphic and as immediately understandable as, "*I'm on the fence.*"

To sit on the fence is to be undecided. If you're "*on the fence*" you're neutral with respect to conflicting positions on a matter.

Of course, to straddle a literal fence is uncomfortable, what with splinters. To straddle a figurative fence is, uncomfortable, too. Ambivalence is a tough place to land.

But, given the complexity of life, there are a lot of fences we might be tempted to straddle.

Straddle-able fences include who to vote for, what schooling choice for your kids, to marry or not, a next career path, or the course of treatment for a health concern. There are lots of others.

In fact, as I talk about fence-sitting, you may be thinking about issues where you haven't quite landed.

Speaking personally, there are some issues about which I haven't made up my mind. I haven't decided which side I'm on, don't know exactly where I stand. The splinters are unwelcome, but I'm not ready to jump.

This morning, though, you and I are warned against fence-sitting when it comes to a Jesus-following life. The Apostle Paul extends an invitation to us to leap off the fence and land on the side of full engagement.

Last Sunday, Jeff spoke about the glory of being ambassadors for Christ. He reminded us - and so did Jennifer Robision - that all who believe in Jesus have been posted and commissioned to represent Jesus to the people He so desperately loves.

Now, Paul identifies himself and all other Christians as co-workers with God (WOW!) and issues an urgent warning.

Determine to be "ALL IN" for the Ministry of Reconciliation (vv. 1-2)

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

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

Defining "grace"

The first thing we need to do as we come to this verse is to get a handle on what Paul means when he speaks of "***the grace of God.***"

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

For instance, if Paul is writing about forgiveness, and then mentions *grace*, he would be referring to the gift of forgiven sin.

If he was addressing the topic of spiritual gifts, and mentioned *grace*, we would assume that he was calling spiritual gifts *graces*.

Shortly we'll come to 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 where Paul talks about generosity. He refers to generosity with money as a *grace*.

So, to what *grace* is Paul referring to here?

Defining this "grace"

Well, he has been talking about the ministry of reconciliation (chapter 5). He has been telling us that each one of us has been given (graced with) the honor and the privilege of sharing Jesus with those around us who don't yet know Him.

So, the "**grace of God**" referred to here in 6:1 is the gift of being involved in sharing the Gospel with those who don't know Jesus yet.

It's what Paul calls here, "**the ministry of reconciliation.**" Paul warns us to not receive this gift "**in vain.**"

So, what would THAT mean?

Receiving a gift "in vain"?

Well, the word vanity means *empty*. And to receive something *emptily* is to receive it and then to not put it to use.

Years ago, my father-in-law, who was an amazing mechanic, gave me the gift of an air compressor. It was a good one, that could have been used to power pneumatic tools for car repair and to take care of painting jobs. I had that compressor for years and the only use to which I ever put it to was airing up car and bicycle tires.

If my father-in-law had known that, he would have thought, "*Dave never put that compressor to its proper use. He received that gift in vain.*"

Maybe you've received gifts that you haven't put to good use.

For a Christian to receive God's *gracious gift* of the ministry of reconciliation "**in vain**" would be for that Christian to NOT be all about sharing Jesus.

And, as tragic as that might be, it is possible. Any one of us might be "all in" when it comes to sharing Jesus with others. Or we might ignore open doors and overlook golden opportunities and reject perfectly timed moments to speak.

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

Paul was issuing a very timely warning to the Corinthians - and to us here at Northwest.

It would appear that as he wrote, the people who made up the church in Corinth were either guilty of having received the ministry of reconciliation in vain or they were on the verge of doing so.

That's why he wrote what we read here today.

And if any of us, today, are on the verge of falling into the same trap of receiving this *grace* of God in vain, Paul is writing to us, too.

And he follows up his warning with a timely reminder of God's goodness.

NOW is the Time! (v. 2)

[2] for He says, "AT A FAVORABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON A DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU" behold, now is "A FAVORABLE TIME," behold, now is "A DAY OF SALVATION"

God helped us in our "Now!" moment

Remember when you saw your need for what only God could provide and turned to Jesus.

You'll recall that you didn't have to twist God's arm or force His hand to grace you with salvation, did you? Of course not. And ever since that day, He has been paying attention to you, listening to you, pouring out His love on you.

That's true for all of us. From Day One, God has proven Himself an incredibly giving God. Like the song says, "*He's been so, so good to us...*"

God said "Yes" to us, the instant we called out to Him. He didn't even wait for us to get our acts together.

No! He demonstrated His love for us in that He saved us while we were still sinners. Christ died for us while we were still in rebellion. (Romans 5:8.)

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

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

It's time for you and me to jump in, put the grace of God to work (this is my new, favorite oxymoron!) and engage in the wonderful ministry of reconciliation.

Now is our NOW! Today is our TODAY!

There are people you know who need to hear about Jesus. Who better to hear it from than you?

You have daily contact with them. You are their friend. You hang together. As Christ's ambassador, you are uniquely positioned to bring the message of reconciliation their way.

Today. Now.

It's tempting to put it off, to procrastinate, (After all, why do today what you can put off until tomorrow?) Talk to them tomorrow. Manana. But of course, tomorrow never comes.

One of our enemy's most brilliant tactics is to whisper into our ears, "Tomorrow." He's craftier than to shout, "No! Don't share Jesus!" So, he tempts us to believe that NOW is not the best time, TODAY is all wrong. Tomorrow is better. Not now.

Which is why God says, "*Now! Today!*"

You have been "graced" with the ministry of reconciliation. It's time to unwrap that gracious gift and put it to use.

Simply put, TODAY is the day to stop straddling the fence, jump off and jump into the great adventure of engaging in the exciting work of telling your friends about your Jesus.

It only makes sense for you and for me to share Christ, given what Christ has given us. Telling our friends about Jesus is the most loving thing we can do for our friends.

And, in the rest of what we're going to see today, Paul pulls back the curtain and lets us see his own commitment to live out this grace. He serves as quite the role model.

Paul's Life: "ALL IN" for the Ministry of Reconciliation (vv. 3-10)

In Everything, INTEGRITY (vv. 3-4a)

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

This is Paul, doing everything he can to make sure that the whole Jesus-following enterprise is never discredited by his words, his actions, or his attitudes.¹

You and I have seen, all too frequently, the tragedy of someone - often a high profile someone - misbehaving and discrediting the faith in full view of a watching world.

A Christian who glaringly doesn't walk the walk leaves behind a trail of spiritual wreckage.

We can all understand how a person without Jesus watching someone with Jesus living as if they didn't have Jesus, would conclude, "*There must not be very much to all of this noise about Jesus.*"?

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

Paul wanted to fulfill the ambassadorial role he had been given by Jesus with distinction.

And the role of an ambassador is to whet the appetite of the people he is with for the country he represents. And each of us is on assignment to whet people's appetites for the Savior we serve.

Let's each of us follow Paul's example and make it our aim to never discredit Jesus or His Gospel by the way we live or speak.

Paul lived for Jesus regardless of what life threw his way. And life threw him quite a few curves.

Paul suffered as a result of living for Jesus. He catalogues some of it in what we read here.

Accepting All HARDSHIPS (vv. 4b-5, 8-10)

Overt physical suffering

[4b] in much endurance², in afflictions, in hardships, in difficulties, [5] in beatings³, in imprisonments, in mob attacks, in labors, in sleeplessness⁴, in hunger

Sometime, take some time and simply page through the book of Acts and the New Testament letters. You'll find that the list I just read is not hyperbole. No exaggeration at all. This is his story.

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

He was stoned nearly to death in the city of Lystra, was imprisoned in Philippi, and was the victim of a mob's violence in Ephesus. He suffered serious persecution.

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

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

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

And as you know, such suffering isn't at all a first century only thing.

Many of our family members in Africa, the Middle East, and East Asia are enduring exactly these kinds of sufferings today.

But the fact that we are not now being sent to prison for our faith doesn't mean that our lives have no connection to what Paul describes as autobiography.

I know lots of you here in our church who have recently gotten so involved in meaningful, life-on-life service to someone in the Name of Jesus that you have had to throw your daily routines out the window.

I'm honored to know those of you who have gone sleepless - and sleep deprivation is no joke! - because you got involved when a friend suffered a late-night tragedy. Have you ever gotten up early to meet a friend for breakfast to talk about Jesus, when you could have slept in? You chose sleeplessness for Jesus' sake.

I've watched as some of you have sacrificially given of your financial treasure to meet pressing needs - here or elsewhere.

You have done all of this in Jesus' Name. And despite your sacrificial service, you haven't quit serving in Jesus' Name. In fact, you are energized by your service to keep serving Him - just like Paul.

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

Of course, being comfortable and rested is nice. But if we are going to be "*all in*" for serving Jesus and if we're going to be done with fence sitting, and if we're going to engage our friends for Jesus' sake, we won't always be comfortable and we won't always be fully rested.

The Apostle Paul also suffered in other ways.

In our own culture, being a Christ-follower has historically been seen as a positive. And it still is, in large measure.

But in many cultures, being a Jesus follower isn't a badge of honor. It's a cause for scorn and ridicule. It sure was in Paul's day.

Damaged reputations

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

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

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

He knew what it was to have his words accepted as true and to see those words come home with life-changing impact.

He also knew what it was to be grossly misunderstood - even on purpose! - and to have the meanings of his words twisted.

Paul had great friends and he had powerful enemies. Some of his current enemies were formerly great friends, and some of his best friends used to be his enemies.

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

His physical life was an insane roller-coaster. But so was his emotional life.

I'm really struck by one of the phrases in this catalogue of life experiences because it is such a study in contrast: **[10a] as sorrowful yet always rejoicing...**

He was a normal man who was completely jazzed about Jesus (non-stop rejoicing), while sorrowful because life was painful.

And there was another curveball life had thrown at Paul due to his being "all in" for Jesus.

Material lack

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

Looking at Paul's "have" list, it would be easy to see him as someone to be pitied. He was the picture of abject destitution. As far as we know, he had no home, no money, no possessions.

But what his words tell us that in his own estimation he was Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk rolled into one when it came to the things that really matter.

He possessed every spiritual blessing imaginable. He had friends to die for, and friends who would die for him. That's wealth.

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

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

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

That's quite a list. And that list speaks of an extraordinary life.

God's fingerprints are all over that life. The fruit of the Spirit is sprouting, the presence of the Spirit is manifest, the power of God is flowing.

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

As he does so often and so well in this second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes autobiographically.

He wants to give us an accurate picture of what life is really like for someone who is “*all in*” for Jesus. He gives us the good, the hard, and the ugly.

In this description, there was nothing fake or contrived. Nothing shallow. It’s all substance.

There was a guy in our church years ago who lovingly described his very “*not with it, uncool*” father with the greatest compliment he could think of: “*My dad is all substance, no show.*” (David Bibighaus). That’s Paul.

Texas ranchers make fun of people who are all show with the saying, “*All hat, no cattle.*” Paul was all cattle.

And, by being so authentic, he destroyed one terrible way of viewing life with Jesus. Here it is.

We are wrong if we think that when we are “*all in*” for serving Jesus and for sharing Jesus, we can expect things to always work out for us, that life will trend predictably positively, or that we will be protected from the worst life can throw at us.

Nope. Paul’s life was the definition of challenging. And yet, it was, to use Jesus’ own words (John 10:10) “*abundant*” in the extreme.

It was a life that he wouldn’t have given up for anything.

There was more joy and meaning and purpose and fulfillment in being “*all in*” for the ministry of reconciliation than anything else Paul could have chosen.

That’s why he has urged the Corinthians - and he has been urging us! - to be done with fence-sitting and be as committed to sharing Jesus with those who are outside as he is.

And then this section of 2 Corinthians ends with what is sort of a confusing shift in focus that I’ve wrestled with all week long.

After pleading with his Corinthian friends to be “*all in*” for the ministry of reconciliation, he now pleads with them to be “*all in*” for deep relational connection with him and Timothy and Silas.

Partners. “ALL IN” for the Ministry of Reconciliation (vv. 11-13)

A Tragic Break in Relationship (vv. 11-12)

Paul is open with his friends (v. 11)

[11] Our mouth has spoken freely to you, you Corinthians⁵, our heart is opened wide.

One sure sign of genuineness is that we are open to share what is most important to us. In what we’ve seen today, Paul has cut himself open and given his friends in Corinth - and us - a good look at his heart.

He has written about his sufferings, his humiliations, and his up and down, roller-coaster life. He’s held nothing back, telling about his inner turmoil and his experience of God’s power. He’s been an open book.

We are pretty certain that Paul and the Corinthians had, at one time, been really close. He lived with them for eighteen months. He and those in the church developed deep relational bonds.

By the time he has sat down to write this letter, though, the relationship had cooled. It used to be warm and authentic and vulnerable and below-the-surface.

Not anymore. The Corinthians have shut down.

Paul’s friends are closed to him (v. 12)

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

He was being open with them, but they were not being open with him.

⁵ The mention of their name adds great love and warmth and affection.

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

This change in their posture toward him deeply grieved Paul.

The break in their relationship was painful to him and in about the most vulnerable words we can imagine, he begged them for a return to how things used to be.

A Heartfelt Plea for Deep Connection (v. 13)

[13] Now in the same way in exchange - I am speaking as to children - open wide your hearts to us as well.

You can't miss the longing Paul has for connection with the Corinthians. But it is connection PLUS something else that he's missing.

It isn't just relationship. It's more than friendship. He wants a deep experience of partnership in a great work.⁶

They had experienced that sense of partnership (shared life) when the Corinthians and Paul were all “*all in*” for the ministry of reconciliation.

Now, the Corinthians' passion for Jesus and for sharing Jesus has cooled. With that loss has come the loss of rich relationship and of partnership.

So, he has written them to stir up their passions, again, for the glory of serving Jesus and sharing Jesus, knowing that when THAT is whole and healthy, so will their relationship be whole and healthy.

Only when they were off the fence, spiritually speaking, would they experience true community.

This - genuine and authentic connection, deep and rich relationship - is what we long for here in our church.

Whether it is in a Care Group or in an ABF or a Bible study or some other gathering, you want more than surface relating. You hunger for connection at a soul-to-soul level.

There is a link between deep, rich, soul-to-soul Christian relating and serving Jesus. In fact, when it comes to intimate relationships with each other, the key is partnership in serving Him. The key is to be of one heart and mind in following Him.

Conclusion:

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

So, let's run together into full engagement in the ministry of reconciliation, trusting God that we will find great connection with each other as we do.

The unintended consequence / unexpected dividend of “*all in*” for Jesus is a richness in community that cannot be found except among those who are also “*all in*” for Jesus.

⁶ The Christian word for fellowship, *koinonia*, captures what Paul is asking for. *Koinonia* speaks of shared life. While not using the word here, this is what Paul longs for.