

## **Embrace the Gospel-Shaped Life!**

2Corinthians 6:1-7:1

When I was a chef one of my least favourite jobs was the deep clean of the deep fryer at the end of each night. Around 60 litres of golden, glistening, and extremely hot oil drained into a large pot before scrubbing the fryer clean ready to be refilled for the next day.

On one occasion, while working in small restaurant in Kyneton, I can vividly recall my boss's 3 y/o daughter coming into the kitchen as we were cleaning and finishing up.

And like a good toddler she instantly ran toward this pot of hot oil hands out ready to splash around. And in a panic, he leapt forward and screamed at her to stay away. Now it turned out that such a loud, urgent, and extravagant call startled her. She paused, then burst into tears.

But I'd think you'd agree, the potential threat and imminent harm warranted such an extravagant, personal, and urgent appeal. And that's exactly what is happening in the passage before us today.

2Corinthians 6 is an urgent, personal, and loving plea from Paul that is confronting because it is totally necessary. We see that in the shocking language of v.1, the Corinthians are in danger of receiving the grace of God in vain.

But to understand 2Cor 6 and it's function as the crescendo of Paul's argument so far in this letter, we need to again get our bearings in the context. Since chp 2 (2:14-7:1) Paul has been defending his ministry as an apostle of Christ to the Corinthians. His actions, travel plans, his ministry, and message.

Paul founded the Corinthian church and spent 18 months with them (Acts 18:11), but since his departure there has been some growing tension and scepticism of Paul and his ministry. He hadn't visited them in some time which he had to defend in this letter (1:15-2:4) but especially some new teachers, new leaders, had started to influence the church.

These 'super apostles' as Paul calls them (11:5) had everything Paul didn't. They were popular, sophisticated, could out debate the philosophers of the day, and promoted a better – or so they thought – version of the Gospel. While Paul was weak, unskilled, and always talking about sin.

So since the start of this letter Paul has been mounting a defence for his ministry. He's is a minister of the new covenant (3:1-18), proclaiming the great treasure of the Gospel of Jesus though he is indeed just a jar of clay (4:1-18). Yes his life is marked by weakness and he is unimpressive, but his ministry of reconciliation is God at work through him for he is an ambassador of Christ (5:1-21)

As we heard last week: God himself is making his appeal through Paul as he pleads on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God (5:20). And so as we come to crescendo of that argument today, Paul speaks directly to them and says they need to change.

This chapter is urgent and emotional, carefully argued, incredibly blunt, and deeply challenging. The choice before them is clear: they need to side with Paul and the Gospel or face the reality they have departed from the Lord Jesus Christ.

We see that in the opening verses as he says you are right on the edge of catastrophe and you need respond, now is the time for action. Look at v.1 *Working together with him, we also appeal to you, "Don't receive the grace of God in vain.*

Paul deliberately gives weight and authority to his appeal: he is working together with God. This is 5:20 in action, God appealing to the Corinthians through Paul: *don't receive the grace of God in vain.*

Which is such a chilling warning right? Paul planted this church, taught them weekly, has kept in contact with them, and yet his fear is that it was all going to come to nothing. The Gospel was going to make no real and lasting change in their life.

So to receive the grace of God in vain is not simply due to hearing the wrong, the Corinthians heard the wonder of Christ's death in their place, the gift of righteousness that was theirs by faith. They heard the true gospel, even responded well initially, but their ongoing response was showing where they truly stood, that they had departed from the gospel Paul preached to them.

And so how do you avoid this? Make sure it isn't us? Well it's by listening to God's word and trusting in God's work of salvation in Jesus. Paul spells that in v.2 with a quote from Isaiah. In Isaiah 49, God promises his servant that a time will come when God will listen, help, and bring salvation.

A joyful day of a new covenant, of comfort and compassion. And Paul is saying that day is now, v.2, *See, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!*

All of God's promises find their yes in Jesus, now is the time to respond! Yet Paul's main point in v.2 is to show that salvation is what God continues to declare even now through Paul – he quotes Isaiah not as what God said but says now. Don't delay, don't hesitate, act now by listening & responding.

But key for the Corinthians and us is to *keep* hearing and responding, not to depart from the Gospel but to have all of life shaped by it, a life of repentance of faith. Where the word of the living God shapes your priorities and perspectives, your values and behaviour, and especially your expectations.

That's really what this whole appeal and chapter are about and it's where Paul goes in vv.3-10 as he surveys his ministry experiences. <sup>3</sup> *We are not giving anyone an occasion for offense, so that the ministry will not be blamed.* <sup>4</sup> *Instead, as God's ministers, we commend ourselves in everything.*

Paul is insisting this his ministry is the real deal, what authentic Gospel-shaped ministry should look like, that is commendable and should not cause offense. Yet that's exactly what it was doing to the Corinthians as they rejected Paul to embrace the sophisticated, impressive, super-apostles.

In their success-mad, reputation-driven, ultra-ambitious, performance-focussed hearts and culture – he wants them to see that looking and sounding slick means nothing. Here is what authentic Christian ministry looks like, what the Gospel-shaped life will look like.

Paul commends himself as the real deal, it isn't what the Corinthians were chasing or perhaps even wanted to hear, it might not be what we want to hear this morning, yet receiving grace will mean embracing right expectations of what being shaped by the Gospel will actually look like for us.



And Paul commends his ministry with: 9x circumstances/hardships introduced with 'by'; then 8x behaviours or virtues introduced by 'through', and 7x paradoxical pairs or contrasts introduced by 'as'.

And we could spend hours pouring through the specific details of each thing but I want us to step back and let the whole list give us the big picture and ask if what Paul is commending are the expectations we actually have for the Christian life.

And I wonder if this more needed than we realise. D.A Carson says, "When it comes to knowing God, many of us constitute a culture of the spiritually stunted. So much of our religion is packaged to address our felt needs—and these are almost uniformly anchored in our pursuit of happiness and fulfillment, without rightly understanding where true happiness and fulfillment lie. God becomes the Great Being who, potentially at least, meets our needs and fulfills our aspirations. We think too little of what he is like, of his wisdom, knowledge, power, love, transcendence, mystery, and glory. We are not intoxicated by his holiness and his love; his thoughts and words capture too little of our imagination, too little of our discourse, too few of our priorities."

So let's consider Paul's example with three questions: Are you expecting the Christian life to be hard? Look at the language of vv.4-5: *by great endurance, by afflictions, by hardships, by difficulties, <sup>5</sup> by beatings, by imprisonments, by riots, by labors, by sleepless nights, by times of hunger.*

It's some list isn't it? Now the particular shape or experience of difficulty we'll face is unpredictable and may change – but make no mistake it will be hard. Living for Jesus and Jesus' way will cost you – especially as you give yourself to the ministry of reconciliation, appealing to people on God's behalf.

It might cost you friendships, see you be excluded or sidelined in your workplace or family, make you the subject of suspicion or whispered about. You'll be called names, you'll be put in countless awkward conversations, increase your social discomfort, and just make your weird to others!

Are you expecting the Christian life to be hard? To increase your suffering as it sets your life on a completely different trajectory to others. Which Paul makes clear in vv.6-7 and our second question: Are you expecting your life to be marked by completely counter-cultural methods and behaviour?

*<sup>6</sup> by purity, by knowledge, by patience, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, <sup>7</sup> by the word of truth, by the power of God; through weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left,*

Paul responds to the hardships of life with a focus NOT on himself but on God – what honours him. There is no vindictive or cruel responses, no slander or one-upping. His goal is to make Jesus look glorious not himself. To win people, not arguments.

He has *both* an unwavering commitment to speak the Gospel – which is the word of truth and power of God – but also to commend the gospel through a sincerity of life, kindness and love even to those who hate & despise him.

And Paul is clear this is hard, unnatural even, as it's the work of the Holy Spirit (v.6) – so much of what he's describing are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 6). God supplies all we need to live the Gospel shaped life, but he is taking us to the heart of authentic Christian living which is not about our comfort and pleasure at all.

It's a life that's not focussed on avoiding suffering but the character that is revealed and refined through it. And so is that your expectation right now of the Christian life? Is that reflected in your prayers? What you long for God to be doing both *for* you and *in* you?

Because when the Gospel takes captive your heart and mind, you expect to live with a new completely new perspective and security. We see that Paul lists off various pairs of contrasting experiences in vv.8-10. <sup>8</sup> *through glory and dishonor, through slander and good report;*

And these contrasting pairs show you just how different the gospel will make you, how you'll be perceived by the world and its standards and values. *regarded as deceivers, yet true;* <sup>9</sup> *as unknown, yet recognized; as dying, yet see—we live; as being disciplined, yet not killed;* <sup>10</sup> *as grieving, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet enriching many; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.*

Are you expecting to the Christian life to be based on a completely different perspective and security? While the world around us says the good and satisfying life is found in owning a house, a successful career, being true to yourself, having the latest tech, or travelling the world – the Christian can say “I have all I need in Christ.” We are driven by a completely different safety and satisfaction.

Yet the temptation to mix the two, the best of both worlds, will always be there. To want all the benefits and blessing of Christ to be expressed the same things the world around us wants. To say Christ is enough but ultimately chase the same security and satisfaction as everyone else.

But more than that, there will also be churches or leaders who promote this – who say God's will for your life is happiness and prosperity: who have little or nothing to say about sin, judgement, and repentance. Teachers who sound impressive, say lots about Jesus, even quote the bible, have a huge following, claim unique insights: yet ultimately are peddling a different gospel which is no gospel at all.

So to get our expectations right we need to make sure we are grounding our life in the only Gospel which is where Paul goes in vv.11-13 with a passionate plea to stick with him which is to stick with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

<sup>11</sup> *We have spoken openly to you, Corinthians; our heart has been opened wide.* <sup>12</sup> *We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.* <sup>13</sup> *I speak as to my children; as a proper response, open your heart to us.*

As Paul urges them to be reconciled to God (5:20) this will also mean they need to be reconciled to Paul himself. For there is no other Gospel than the one the apostles, like Paul, preached and handed down to them and to us.

And it's important we see that. This is not popularity or opinion polls. This is not a plea for the Corinthians to like him. This is a call to renew their reliance on the Gospel he preaches and embodies.



And as he does that Paul is doing two things for us. Firstly, he's modelling for us that urging people to be reconciled to God is a vulnerable and heartfelt plea that comes from love. Calling people to respond to the Gospel is never about threats or manipulation but must be sincere and transparent.

Paul speaks as a loving Father affectionally fighting for their very lives because that's what's at stake.

But secondly, he is showing us that to make sure we don't receive the grace of God in vain, to make sure we have right expectations for the authentic Christian life, it's the apostolic gospel we must never depart from, keep embracing, keep listening to, keep conforming to. The Gospel that does and will challenge us to deny ourselves, to put sin to death, to be self-controlled and bear the counter-cultural fruit of the Spirit, and yes, even to suffer for the cause of Christ.

It's why we must be both a church and Christians committed to reading, preaching, and applying the whole counsel of God, the diligent study of Scripture in our growth groups, children's and youth ministries – never picking and choosing the bits we like, prefer, or are just easier to accept.

It's why you need your bible's open right now and each week, testing all things against God's Word because it's only delusional arrogance that thinks we won't be tempted to twist, change, or omit parts of God's Word that will ease our conscience or increase our comfort.

Stick with the Gospel. And if the Corinthians are going to do that, if we are going to do that, it's not simply a matter of what we embrace, but also what we must separate from. That's the major focus in v.14 onwards as Paul says authentic Christianity must be totally committed to holiness.

*<sup>14</sup> Do not be yoked together with those who do not believe. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness?*

Now I think it's really unwise for a Christian to date or pursue marriage with a non-Christian, and the bible makes that clear in several places. But to not be yoked together with an unbeliever here is not speaking about that at all and it would be a quite sudden change in topic if it was.

But just as this passage is not talking marriage, nor is it calling for a total separation from unbelievers as if Christians are to isolate themselves into holy huddles. Paul made that clear in 1Corinthians 5 (5:9-11) – in fact he expects non-Christians will be in church (14:22-25) and all Christians are meant to commend the gospel through holy, Christ-like, lives as we live among unbelievers (1Pet 2:11-12).

This idea of not yoking-together is drawn from the OT (Lev 19:19; Dt 22:10), with a particular focus on not yoking together a mismatch of animals, like an ox with a donkey to plough together. It's a picture of shared labour, of allies, working alongside each other toward a common goal.

But the mismatch or difference means the common goal doesn't work because there they don't share that goal. Like a lopsided yoke with two animals pulling in different directions, they are in conflict

Paul is showing the Corinthians what is causing them to withhold their affection from him and embrace the gospel (v.12) is their attachment to the super-apostles and their false teaching.

And so as he calls them to stick with the Gospel they need to break with them – separate not simply because they are different but actually unbelievers. They are to see their teaching and influence not as something to entertain but make a complete break from. An incompatible mismatch.

That's the point of the questions in vv.14-16 that have the presumed answer of none or nothing. Light and darkness, righteousness and lawlessness, Christ and Belial – a term for Satan, the temple and idols. Paul's pulling no punches to expose these false teachers as servants of Satan.

And so for the Corinthians, they need a clean and sharp break from these super-apostles. And so Paul's focus is not our business partnerships or the tradies we employ or even who we marry, but saying there must be no attachment, no compromise, no tolerance for false-teaching along with the behaviour, the worldliness and idolatry it enables (cf. Rev 2:14, 21).

And this means we need to be discerning. No matter how dressed up it is in Christian language and values, how slick, successful, influential they might be, we have to test, ask important questions, and be incredibly vigilant to what influences and shapes our worship of the living God.

They are to separate because central to the Gospel call is a commitment to holiness consistent with our identity as God's people. That's the focus as Paul strings together a range of OT quotes in vv.16-18 that take us a journey from Leviticus to Ezekiel, Hosea, Isaiah, and 2Samuel.

Yet they work together to highlight the privileged and intimate relationship God's people have as God himself dwells with them in the temple. He's welcomed us – though we didn't seek it. He dwells with us though we are so unworthy, walks among us though we are so unholy.

And why? Because we made us his people, he is our Father, we are his children. Layer upon layer declaring the awesome privilege of knowing God, of receiving his grace.

His amazing grace to save us, make us his own, and dwell with us. That v.16, we are both together and individually the temple of the living God. And you can hear Paul pleading can't you: how could you possibly entertain flirting with idolatry, embracing false-teaching, returning to the world when you have to know and belong to the true, living, unique, holy, generous, loving, and present God?

An identity and privilege that has always meant distinction and separation from the idolatry and values of the unbelieving world. In v.17 Paul recalls that as the exile finished and Israel left Babylon God called them vigilant separation and holiness.

They had to come out of Babylon not simply physically but spiritually in their values, priorities, and actions. To never consider compromise. *To be separate and not touch any unclean thing* (v.17).

So while on the surface this call to not be yoked with unbelievers may not seem immediately relevant to us, it is a call to separation and holiness in all of life in response to our rich identity as God's people.



That while it may not primarily be about who we marry or date or the business endeavours we invest in, it certainly shapes and impacts them as we commit to being God's holy people in all of life.

Which is how Paul finishes: 7:<sup>1</sup> *So then, dear friends, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh & spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*

Paul knows that the Corinthians, just like us, live in an atmosphere that will constantly encourage us to swap the gospel for something that appears to promise more but ultimately delivers nothing. That time and time again our hearts will be drawn away from resting in God's goodness and promises to embrace the seductive idols of our culture.

So to live the authentic Christian life, a life that is richer, more satisfying, more joyful, than we can possibly imagine, while at the same time being distinct, hard and costly, we need to gaze at the greatness of our God. *Bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*

The fear of God, as Keller reminds us, is not about being scared of God but in awe: "To fear the Lord is to be overwhelmed with wonder before the greatness of God and his love... Fearing him means bowing before him out of amazement at his glory and beauty."

Which I hope you can see is why Paul is so insistent on drawing the Corinthians and us back to the one and only Gospel. As Paul said in 4:6, the gospel shines into our hearts *to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.* (2Cor 4:6)

The Gospel reveals to us the incomparable value and beauty of our God, the boundless riches of receiving grace and as we are united to Christ with every spiritual blessing.

And so Paul makes his heartfelt, urgent, and loving plea to the Corinthians – and to us – to not receive God's grace in vain, to embrace right expectations of the gospel shaped life and separate from anything that would hinder us from embracing holiness, it is not some bitter pill to swallow.

The Gospel-shaped life is not about having to begrudgingly leave behind a better life we'd rather have. No, it's about gazing afresh at the beauty and glory of God displayed in the face of Christ which will lead us to separate from the world and idols as we see them clearly for what they are.

As you ground our identity in Christ, as you build your life on the work of Christ and promises of God, it will make you different, it will give you both the conviction and need to make changes, to separate, to guard your heart and mind, to keep listening to and stick with the Gospel.

As you remember and reflect on all God has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ it should ultimately lead us to throw ourselves into living for him in a way that's consistent with the fact that we belong to him, he dwells with us, we are loved children of the true and living God.

The way forward with holiness is not a matter of willpower but worship. Delighting in God's character and goodness, basking in the richness of all he has done for us, given us, and made us to be.

Isn't that we so helpfully sing together: Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace.

Brothers and sisters, let's live the authentic Christian life where the gospel shapes every aspect of our life. <sup>1</sup> *So then, dear friends, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.*

Let's pray.