

THE ADVENTURE OF FAITH

By Steve Zeisler

C.S. Lewis once said the following about poet George Herbert, looking back on a time in his life when he himself was antagonistic towards the Christian faith:

Here was a man who seemed to me to excel all the authors I had read in conveying the very quality of life as we live it from moment to moment, but the wretched fellow, instead of doing it all directly, insisted on mediating it through what I still would have called the "Christian mythology." The upshot of it all could nearly be expressed, "Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores."

Lewis could not bring himself to accept what people like George Herbert believed, but there was reality, attractiveness, authenticity and vitality about such people that he found lacking in others. This is why he declared, "Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores."

If believers do not frequently manifest the kind of Christianity that causes non-Christians to think along these lines, something is wrong. They may not agree with us, to be sure. Certain elements of the Christian faith are totally foreign to those who have been blinded by the god of this age; nevertheless they ought to be challenged by it.

In the passage to which we come this morning, chapter 6 of 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul is concluding a lengthy section (chapters 2-6) concerning the nature of Christian ministry. The phrases "ministers of a new covenant," and "ministers of reconciliation" are described and advocated as superior to the ministry of a group with the inflated title, "super-apostles" who preached a "different gospel" (11:4-5). If our lives do not manifest vital Christianity, rather than a shallow substitute--a Christianity of substance, not of style--then we are in danger of receiving God's grace "in vain," to use Paul's words in the opening verse of chapter 6:

As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says,

"in the time of my favor I heard you,
and in the day of salvation I helped you."

I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:

No stumbling blocks

"Our ministry must not be discredited," says Paul. We take great care to avoid placing a stumbling block in anyone's path; anything that will cause someone to fall or to veer off in the wrong direction and miss what God is offering them.

We must recall the context of these statements. Paul concluded chapter 5 with the powerful statement, "Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." As ministers, ambassadors of reconciliation, Christians should be very careful that their behavior is such that nothing is placed as a stumbling block in the way of non-believers.

When we hear the words, "stumbling block," what comes to mind? Don't we usually think of some of the awkward, hard to accept aspects of the Christian faith? The insistence of the New Testament that "there is only one Mediator between God and man," for instance. The only means by which sinners can come to know a righteous God is through Jesus Christ. There is only one way to heaven, only one Savior. There are no other options. Don't we at times think of this hard truth as an impediment to non-Christians who are considering the gospel? They want instead a more flexible, inclusive gospel.

Endurance attracts the attention of unbelievers

The simplicity of the gospel seems likely to put off those with great intellectual gifts. While the learned are forever probing the reason why things are the way they are, Christians seem to have rather simplistic, naive answers to the human dilemma. This is why we are tempted to be more sophisticated in our presentation of the claims of the gospel--so as to present fewer stumbling blocks to the non-believer.

But the passage before us, in which Paul says he is determined to "put no stumbling block in anyone's path," seems to glory in the difficult and awkward elements of real Christianity. He is doing this to remind us that it is not the difficult, embarrassing things about the gospel that cause people to stumble, rather, it is our very efforts to dilute, soften and misrepresent the gospel that cause problems for unbelievers. In his pre-Christian days, C.S. Lewis did not like Christianity, yet he found himself attracted to the vibrancy and vitality which he recognized in the lives of certain of his friends and in the poetry of George Herbert. Let us be careful that in our efforts to remove stumbling blocks we instead mask the reality of Christianity, and thereby achieve exactly what we hoped to avoid.

Leaving in the hard parts

Beginning with verse 4, Paul goes on to summarize what he himself had been through in the course of his ministry:

Rather, as servants of the living God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

What a remarkable man! What a remarkable life! There are a number of things about this description by Paul of his Christian life that, on the one hand, would make people want to avoid contact with such an individual, yet these words are vibrant with real life. Someone has described Christians as "always changing, continuously joyful, and everlastingly in trouble." Compared with the apostle's description of his life, even this seems an under-statement. Living the Christian life is not easy, but it's vital and real.

Paul begins this list by using the word "endurance." This is a descriptive word in Greek which means "to hang in, to stay under pressure." Then he speaks of "troubles, hardships and distresses." Here he is referring to the beatings we take in life, when we become sick, when things go wrong--floods, earthquakes, etc.--all the hard things that beset us. These are not unique to Christians; they happen to everyone. But how we respond to them is what makes us different. If we can hang in and handle pressures that crush others, if we can continue to love those who have misused and hurt us, then we have endured. Like those tri-athletes who bike two hundred miles, swim ten miles, and run double marathons, demonstrating incredible endurance in the process, there is something about Christians who endure under tremendous pressure, and it is that endurance that attracts the attention of non-believers.

Paul then goes on to list some uncommon circumstances--"beatings, imprisonments and riots." He suffered these persecutions for his faith because he would not back down. I was in a riot once, at Stanford University in the spring of 1970, during the time of student revolt against the Viet Nam war. One night on the quad there were scores of helmeted police, and a growing swell of students and onlookers. A number of fiery speeches challenged listeners to take action. Suddenly, the crowd began moving toward the Applied Electronics Lab to destroy it--which they succeeded in doing. Tear gas canisters began to fly, megaphones began to sound. Although I was only on the fringes of the action, I became aware very quickly that a riot is a frightening thing. But Paul himself was the very subject of a riot once. In Ephesus, the whole city was in hot pursuit of the apostle because of his faith. The truth was making an impact whether people liked it or not. There was a challenging reality about Paul's faith which caused him to suffer "beatings, imprisonments and riots."

"Hard work, sleepless nights and hunger," speak of discipline. He deliberately subjected himself to nights when he went without sleep, times when he suffered hunger; then there was the hard work of studying, preaching and traveling so as to encourage the saints. No one made him do these; he chose to do them himself. There are times when we suffer persecution from others, but there are other occasions when, because we are committed, we spend ourselves for the cause of Christ.

Illuminating contrasts

In verses 6 and 7, Paul goes on to talk about, not the difficulties of his Christian life, but the character-building that God was accomplishing within him. There is a beautiful contrast in verse 6, where he begins with the word "purity"--"purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love"--and ends with "sincere love." There is a tenderness in what God is producing in this man who has suffered so much for the gospel--the character of the Savior himself.

Verse 7 then presents another amazing contrast. "Truthful speech"--which is always challenging speech, spoken in the face of error--"and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left." A man of purity and sensitivity, yet a warrior who knows the power of God, declaring God's truth, and carrying God's weapons, willing to go to war. Paul was inwardly kindhearted, yet outwardly engaged in life, involved in tearing down strongholds of evil.

Then there follows a series of wonderful paradoxes: "through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything." If our tendency is to try and make Christianity as innocuous as possible, as much as possible like what those in the world already believe, so as to avoid stumbling blocks which may prevent their coming to faith in Christ, then I contend that everything Paul says here is in direct contradiction.

He is championing a life without recognition; purity instead of self-indulgence; close acquaintance with beatings; sorrow and poverty; rejection and misunderstanding by loved ones--having nothing and possessing everything. This is the very antithesis of attempting to sugar-coat strong medicine. Such a life might be disagreed with, but will never be called boring.

Ken Kesey, the novelist, was at Stanford University back in the late '60's. He was, to use Bible language, a "wild donkey of a man." He enjoyed bursting the bubble of liberal academics, the kind of people who held genteel conversations at sherry parties about the excitement of a changing world, the youth revolt, the sexual revolution, etc. When Kesey threw a party, however, he invited Hell's Angels, who arrived with their knives, chains, and inclination to violence. The academics loved to talk about social change in a controlled atmosphere, but what was this man doing inviting these strange people to his parties? Kesey was not satisfied dealing with the theoretical. He was not a servant of God (actually, the opposite in many ways), but he, too, insisted that any idea had to be able to authenticate itself in real life.

Paul had been in prison, he had been involved in riots. We hear a lot today about the war on drugs, about the tragedy of crack babies in the inner cities, etc., but many of these comments are made by people who have never been to an inner city, who don't know any such babies, who have never been in a prison. Paul was bald, bowlegged and funny looking, he was not a good speaker, yet while his detractors debated, Paul had a

war to fight. There is something about this that makes us want to be part of it. "Glory and dishonor;...having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

Reality checks

If involving ourselves in the real human condition--difficult, painful, peculiar--is what makes Christianity attractive, then what does Paul suggest are the stumbling blocks the Corinthians need to be wary of? There are three. First, in verse 2 of chapter 6:

For he says,
"In the time of my favor I heard you,
and in the day of salvation I helped you.
I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."

Paul is suggesting that one of the things we must avoid lest we present a stumbling block to people is a loss of urgency. We are referring to the spiritual "manana syndrome." We must insist choices cannot be put off indefinitely, as if there will always be opportunity tomorrow. God is reaching out to us, says the apostle, and now is the time to respond. If Christians lose their sense of urgency they have placed a stumbling block before people.

We must not dilute our testimony, saying darkness and light can easily mingle

We find a second stumbling block alluded to in verse 11 and following:

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange--I speak as to my children--open wide your hearts also.

The Corinthians' love was restricted and reserved--and that is also a stumbling block. They withheld affection from Paul as they grew enamored of his opponents. A competition for status between Paul's apostleship and the one claimed by those who came later to Corinth had left him devalued and loved less as a result. The apostle's point here is that a love that must meet certain standards, that imposes rules and regulations, that must be earned before it expresses itself, is a stumbling block. "Open wide your hearts," says Paul. The love that ought to be apparent in the Christian community is one that takes no regard for its own advantage, that no longer views anybody "according to the flesh," as he pointed out in chapter 5.

In Paul's allusion to the Corinthians as his children I see a circumstance I run into with my teenage children occasionally. Teenagers are often embarrassed by their parents. As a matter of fact, I feel I would not be doing my job as a parent if I did not every now and then say or do something embarrassing in front of my children. They want to be considered sophisticated, and this requires them to hold their parents at arm's length. But, says the apostle, don't forget that your father really loves you. He had opened his heart to the Corinthians, was it too much to ask that they should do the same in return? Thus, if our fellowship does not manifest love that is thoroughly selfless, openhearted, and devoid of rules, we have placed a stumbling block in the way of people.

Yoked together

I will comment briefly on the closing verses of this section. Verse 14:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God,

and they will be my people."

"Therefore come out from them and be separate,"
says the Lord.

"Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you."

"I will be a Father to you,
and you will be my sons and daughters,"
says the Lord Almighty.

Here, in yet another series of contrasts--righteousness and wickedness, light and darkness, believer and unbeliever, etc.--Paul admonishes that Christians do nothing to dilute their Christian testimony. This too is a stumbling block. A yoke was a device worn about the necks of animals to compel them to walk and to work together. It was hurtful and painful (and for that reason contrary to Jewish law) to yoke together different species of animals, say an ox and an donkey. They were different sizes; they walked at different gaits, resulting in misery for both.

Marriage is the most obvious illustration of how this passage ought to be applied. A Christian should not yoke himself or herself in marriage to an unbeliever. If they do, they will diminish the possibility of oneness in marriage, or they will dull the cutting edge of the gospel. There must be a recognition that what Christians are committed to is different from their unbelieving neighbors' view life. We must not dilute our testimony, saying that light and darkness can easily mingle, and therefore we must not be unequally yoked.

To summarize, the three stumbling blocks which Paul alludes to here are, first, a loss of urgency on the part of Christians. If our lives and our teaching do not urge people to take the gospel seriously, then we have presented a stumbling block. Secondly, restricted love. If our love has to be earned, and can be withheld for any number of reasons--if our love isn't radical and unfeigned--then we have placed another stumbling block before people. And thirdly, we must not dilute the gospel. We must not give the impression that righteousness and wickedness can join together. Each of these three activities has the effect of diminishing the gospel. If we fall into them, we are failing in our role as ambassadors of the good news.

On the other hand, being a warrior with weapons of righteousness in either hand, yet one who is committed to kindness and patience, enduring hardship and persecution, rejoicing in blessing for others even at cost to himself--someone like that will shake people up but will never drive them from the Lord. On the contrary, such activity, as C.S. Lewis discovered, may be the very thing that attracts others to the gospel.

The apostle's opening words in chapter 7 declare that holiness is an adventure. Do you believe that? The promise of God that he will be our Father and that we will be his children, that he will be our Companion in life, ought to make purity downright adventuresome and engaging.

Here is what Paul says:

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

God grant that we might be such a people.

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