

SERVANTS OF GOD – OUR MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

By Doug Goins

I subscribe to an email service that downloads a transcript of Chuck Colson's daily radio program, *Breakpoint*, to my computer every day. I look forward to reading Colson's perspective on political and economic issues, and how he thinks we ought to respond as believers. He wrote *Breakpoint* early Wednesday morning, November 8, after the election, and it struck me in its relevance. It is even more relevant today, five days later. He talks about this "amazing cliffhanger election:"

Whichever way things turn out, some people will be joyous, and some people will be dismayed. But one thing is absolutely clear. It should not alter in the slightest the course that we, as Christians, follow in our society.

One of my friends wrote me recently after a particularly discouraging situation and said, "Chuck, just remember. We have enlisted for the duration in service to the truth." I love that. As a matter of fact, I'm having that plaque made up and put in my office in Washington, alongside the one from Mother Theresa that says, "Faithfulness, not success."

What we need to remember is, if you're disappointed in the election results when they're finally clear, that's understandable. All of us have our partisan choices. Maybe you'll be jubilant over them. If so, you're going to think, "Well, the culture war's been won." And if you're discouraged over the results, you'll think, "The culture war's been lost."

Nonsense!

Cultures are changed from the bottom up. Fads start from the top down. Movements start from the bottom up. Remember when de Tocqueville came to this country—the French statesman who wrote so brilliantly about American life and talked about our churches being on fire and about the peculiar characteristics of American life—he said that Americans really had a sense of civic duty and civic responsibility. Tocqueville said that what moves America are the "habits of the heart."

He was absolutely right! This is the genius of America. We are moved by the tastes and dispositions of the people. We're moved by the way we live with our neighbors around us. People need to see something better, something that they can long for in our lives. That isn't affected by elections. They're not going to look to Washington for that, they're going to look to us.

So we keep living in biblical faithfulness.... (1)

Chuck Colson's convictions are strongly biblical. The apostle Paul expresses the same conviction in writing to his friends in Philippi. In Philippians 2:14-16a, he summarizes what it means for us to live differently in a politicized world as followers of Jesus Christ. It is a world gripped by fear, anger, partisanship, recrimination and uncertainty. We could say that it is a world driven by unrealistic election hopes. In the middle of this atmosphere, Paul calls us "lights in the world." He writes, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among

whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life....” Paul understands that when the life of Jesus Christ is expressed through us, it is attractive, winsome, and engaging. He describes this New Covenant lifestyle in the phrases I excerpted from the previous study (Discovery Paper #4633), and those we will examine in this section. The apostle writes about our identity, “Now all these things are from God, who... gave us the ministry of reconciliation... Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ,... in everything, commending ourselves as servants of God” (2 Corinthians 5:18, 20; 6:4).

In 2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2, we examined the message we have been given. It is the message of the gospel, the good news, which tells us how we can be reconciled to God through the forgiveness of sin, and receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Second Corinthians 6:3-10 considers the nature of the ministry of reconciliation. Paul uses his own life as an example of how to live out the good news of reconciliation with God. He is self-disclosing in the paragraph, and his transparency is helpful to our own understanding of what it means to “walk our talk.” It gives each of us an opportunity to examine our Christian life. As we work through this passage, the question we should ask is, “Am I sold out to Jesus Christ? Am I radically committed to manifesting his character in everything that I do?” The heart of the passage defines us as servants of God. We will begin with 6:1, then skip to verse 3, because the thought of verse 3 flows right out of verse 1. Verse 2 is parenthetical, and we examined it in the previous passage. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:1, 3-10:

And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished but not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

Why does Paul talk about himself in this way? This paragraph is at the end of an extended section in the letter, beginning in 2:12 and concluding in 7:1. In this section Paul responds to challenges and accusations about his lifestyle and ministry. His apostolic authority has been challenged, and his personal motivation for ministry has been attacked. Even his personal conduct and priorities have been challenged by the believers in Corinth. Probably the saddest part about the situation is that most of the people who are challenging Paul are people he won to Christ. They are his spiritual children, but they have turned around to question his ministry.

The paragraph is a review of themes that we studied in previous sections of the 2 Corinthian letter. Paul condenses what the ministry of reconciliation looks like if we choose to live it out to the fullest, with the “pedal to the metal,” so to speak. I struggle to measure up to the description of New Covenant living that is presented here. As I studied this passage, I was convicted about how far short I fall from Paul’s example. But I want to be like Paul in terms of spiritual priorities, and I want to embrace the pattern for living that is offered to us here. As I prayed for myself this week, I also prayed for our church and whomever God chooses to hear this message. I prayed that God would save us from passivity, from idling in neutral in our relationship with Jesus. I prayed that God would create a hunger in us to personally experience this pattern of radical adventurous Christian living—as Chuck Colson says, so that “people will see something better in us,” and be attracted to our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. I pray that we will shine as stars in the night sky.

Our identity as “servants of God”

Beginning with verses 3 and 4, Paul defines us as servants of God: "...giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance." Paul's concern is about being discredited. It does matter how people view us, especially those people who have not yet become followers of Jesus Christ. One of the things that drowns out the message of reconciliation is the bad example of those of us who profess to follow Jesus, but then do not live like it. We end up being walking contradictions, and putting the message to the lie. Non-Christians will see the inconsistencies in our lives and use it as an excuse for rejecting Christ.

My wife has become friends with a man at work who has told her hair-raising stories about how Christians have taken advantage of him and manipulated him financially. It has become a stumbling block and an offense to him. He is not just "blowing smoke," they are actual situations where Christians have dishonored the name of the Lord. Paul's concern with living an obstacle-free life carries the idea of not causing offense. "Giving no cause for offense in anything," literally means not causing a mis-step, not causing someone to stumble, trip, and fall over us because of things we do that are morally and ethically irresponsible. It gives offense when non-Christians look at us and see that kind of example. Paul is concerned that we live our lives so that accusations against our character can never stick, and then our lifestyle of New Covenant ministry cannot be discredited.

It reminds me of a story about a little boy who walked by the home of his Sunday School teacher one Saturday, and noticed his teacher building a wooden trellis in his side yard. The little boy quietly sat down and watched without saying a word. After awhile the teacher noticed him, and was pleased that the boy was paying attention to his work. He said, "Son, are you trying to get some tips in carpentry?" The little boy replied, "No, I just wanted to see what happens when a Sunday School teacher hits his thumb with a hammer." The point is that our lives must authenticate the message that we speak. If it doesn't, people will see right through the hypocrisy. In my life it is usually my children who see through the hypocrisy most quickly and are quick to point out where my walk does not measure up to my talk.

Our goal is to live with the confidence expressed in the first half of verse 4, "...in everything commending ourselves as servants of God." Paul knows that the quality of his servanthood is not only lived out in front of people, but God himself. He is the ultimate authority, the one who commends or does not commend; he is the one who matters in terms of how we live our life. Paul also makes the same point in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12. He alternates between talking about what the Thessalonians know of him—"I lived an open life. I never lied to you, I never cheated you, and you know that. You watched how I live!"—but relates it with his responsibility to God. Paul even describes God as "the God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory." He emphasizes that we take orders from a loving God in every aspect of life. It is the only basis for the approval that really matters.

The participle in verse 4, "commending" has a very close connection to the participle in verse 1, "working." Verse 1 says, "*working* together with [God]..." and verse 4 says, "...in everything *commending* ourselves as servants of God." This means that the secret of power and effectiveness in life and ministry is based on our relationship to God. It focuses on the burden of responsibility we have when we try to love and serve people. In whatever we are called to do we will find the necessary resources in our relationship with God in Jesus Christ; and then we are responsible to give ourselves away to the people we serve on his behalf. Over the long haul there will be a growing lifestyle of faithfulness and trustworthiness as servants of God.

Trustworthiness as "servants of God"

Paul describes this pattern for living in the middle of verse 4 with the phrase, "...in much endurance." "In much endurance" defines the choice that we make individually as servants of God to stay under pressure. *The Message* paraphrases it as, "staying at our post, alertly, and unswervingly." We know that sort of faithfulness or trustworthiness is always threatened. The pressure on our commitment to be servants of God can crush us. There is always pressure to give in, compromise, give up, or sell out. Faithfulness and trustworthiness is difficult to sustain,

and just because someone claims to be a Christian does not mean that they are a person who expresses it in much endurance. Endurance will be evident in how we live out our Christian life and faith.

I thought of an old story of another little boy who was walking along a beach on a beautiful sunny day. He saw an older woman sitting under a big beach umbrella reading a book. He walked up to her and startled her by asking, “Are you a Christian?” She jumped a little and said, “Well, yes I am.” He said, “Do you read your Bible every day?” She said, “Yes, I try to read my Bible every day.” He said, “Do you pray often?” and she said, “Yes, almost every day I pray.” He said, “Do you always tell the truth?” She patiently chuckled and said, “I think I do. Yes, I think I’m a truthful person.” He said, “Well, good. Would you hold my quarter while I go swimming?” What is the little boy looking for? He is looking for evidence of trustworthiness and faithfulness in somebody who can be trusted with his money.

In verses 4 and 5, Paul summarizes a pressure-packed life, the context in which his faithfulness grew. It was evident in his lifestyle, his attitudes and his behavior: “...in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonment, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger...” The verse has three groups of three different ways in which victorious living and endurance demonstrate itself, and Paul uses this strong language to detail the harsh realities in his life. Afflictions, hardships, and distresses represent the pressure of difficult, out-of-control circumstances. “Afflictions” suggests the normal irritations and difficulties that all of us experience in life, such as emotional stresses, financial struggles, family relational issues, or struggles in the workplace. They are things that cannot be escaped. “Hardships” means physical suffering that is inescapable. Perhaps it is personal health problems or the responsibility of taking care of a loved one who is physically incapacitated. It speaks of limitation. “Distresses” literally means “narrow places.” It carries with it a sense of confinement, and a feeling of being trapped by circumstances over which there is no control. It is the feeling of being shut in by life, or suffocated.

But Paul witnesses to the fact that in the middle of these difficult circumstances, God leads him in triumph. In chapter 1 of this letter he writes,

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.

(2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

This reminds me of Dana Carlson, who is bedridden in the hospital for at least five weeks, waiting for God to bring her quadruplets to full term. Knowing that Dana is an active person, there must be a great sense of confinement and limitation in being flat on her back in bed for such a long period of time.

The next group of difficulties Paul mentions speaks of his suffering because of other people. The beginning of verse 5 is about the pressure of opposition, “... in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults...” Those words represent violent response to Paul as a servant of God. He suffered because he preached the gospel. At least nine different times the New Testament tells us that Paul was beaten almost to death. The New Testament also tells us that he was imprisoned at least three times. Paul was an activist, so he must have hated confinement. “Tumults” speaks of rioting, political instability, and mob violence. In almost every city Paul visited there was either religious or political violence against him because of how he lived. Again, Paul’s beatings, tumults, and imprisonments are tied to people’s opposition to Jesus. In all the opposition, Paul witnesses to the power of God working through him and giving him strength and resource. He writes in chapter 4 of this letter:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body (verse 7-10).

In the three trips I have taken to Pakistan I have met men and women who have left the darkness of Islam and accepted salvation in Jesus Christ, and every one of them have suffered physically. They have either endured beatings or have had to relocate to start a new life because of death threats. All of them have suffered tremendously for their faith in Jesus Christ. So far, God has spared us from that, but it may at some point be reality for us as well.

The last three groups of difficulties Paul experiences are self-imposed. He says in the last half of verse 5, "...in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger..." These difficulties refer to the pressures of the personal commitments Paul has made, because he is disciplined in choosing to follow Jesus and minister for his sake. "Labors" represent hard work. Many times Paul worked all day as a tent-maker so he could spend every night teaching the scriptures in homes. He says to the Thessalonians that he served them without charge for the gospel, meaning he earned money apart from his ministry among them. "Sleeplessness" refers to the many long nights he endured without sleep because he was ministering as a conscientious servant of Jesus Christ. It also includes the nights when the danger was so great and conditions so uncomfortable he could not sleep anyway. It goes with the territory. Finally, he speaks of "hunger." There were times when Paul went without food, either because there was too much work to do and eating was a luxury; or because he did not have the material resources to buy food. In chapter 4 of this letter, Paul calls the nine difficulties outlined in verses 4 and 5 "momentary, light afflictions." In light of what is to come in eternity, all nine of these struggles do not mean much at all because Paul never gave up or lost hope. In all the pressure-packed difficulties he endured he displayed the character of a servant of God.

The first half of verse 6 lists four spiritual qualities or character traits that are manifested in Paul's life on a consistent basis. The good news is that we can exhibit the same things as servants of God. We can live "...in purity, in knowledge, in patience and in kindness..." "Purity" means unmixed motives, an undefiled heart, and a singleness of purpose. It means that we live the same way in private that we do in public. It speaks of moral uprightness and impeccability. It counters the rampant sexual immorality that was true in Paul's day and that is also true in our day. God calls us to be people of moral purity and integrity, both publicly and privately. We can exhibit "knowledge," a firm grasp on truth. We can have insight into biblical truth and understanding of how God expresses himself through his word. We can learn to think and speak biblically. We can exhibit "patience." Particularly here, the Greek word for patience means forbearance with people, especially those who are difficult to deal with. This speaks of patience with people even when they are wrong-headed, misguided, or insensitive. It means patience under provocation, which is the toughest kind to maintain. Finally, we can exhibit "kindness," which simply means being courteous, gentle, gracious; not harsh, cold, or sarcastic. We can be people whose communication is warm and loving and caring.

None of us exhibit these spiritual qualities on our own. In ourselves we know that we are not people of purity or knowledge or patience or kindness. Only God can produce these graces, these beautifully attractive traits in us. He has given us resources to make it possible to enhance and exhibit these graces in our lives. Beginning in the middle of verse 6 through verse 7, Paul highlights four different spiritual resources every one of us has been given to bring out attractiveness in our lives. He writes, "...in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; [and he summarizes all four of them] by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left..." At the root of all of these resources is the Holy Spirit. Paul understands that the Holy Spirit is personal, powerful, given as our helper, counselor, guide, and comforter. He is the one on whom Paul relies for direction in life and ministry. It is the delight of the Holy Spirit to release the life of Jesus in all of us. Jesus himself, by the Spirit, lived in Paul and empowered him, and he will do the same thing in us. He wants to uphold us and give us the resources we need in any situation regardless of how pressure-packed life becomes.

The second spiritual resource is genuine, supernatural love, the Greek word *agape*. It is God's love for us, poured into our heart in Jesus Christ. We cannot create it, and he is the only one who sustains it. Paul said in the previous chapter that the love of Christ controls him. This love is not hypocritical, or phony, and it is not for show. Jesus' love is tough-minded, not sentimental or maudlin; it is the love that sent him to the cross. He is committed to our

best so he acted in love. The kind of love Paul talks about here is sacrificial, and it is only God who can express it through us. We do not create it in ourselves.

The third resource is the “word of truth.” Although the NIV translates it “truthful speech,” it is not about integrity or purity. What Paul refers to by the word of truth is the resource of the scriptures, God’s revelation in his word. The word of truth will help us see how God sees life. A consistent study of the word of God will enable us to cultivate a lifestyle of purity, knowledge, patience and kindness. It is the word of God that explains life to us, enlightens us about ourselves and enables us to become the kind of people we want to be.

The “power of God” is the next resource listed in verse 7, and Paul ties it to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is a restatement of the divine power source by which Paul lives and is able to exercise his ministry in much endurance. Paul is convinced that even in the simplest things, God is at work through him, especially in the realm of human relationships. God expresses himself through each one of us to have a good influence on the people around us. It is the power of God at work that gives us spiritual influence and encourages us to “stir each other up to good works and to love,” as the writer of Hebrews 10:24 says. The power of God draws people to the Savior as we share the message that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.” It is only the power of God that can bring the gospel message to life in somebody’s heart. We cannot change them, it is the power of God at work through the message that brings spiritual transformation.

Finally, Paul summarizes the four preceding resources by using strong military imagery. He uses the term “weapons of righteousness” because the reality is that we are engaged in a battle. This is cutting edge stuff that we are dealing with; there is an enemy who opposes who we are and what we stand for, but the good news is that God will use our spiritual character as it is expressed in purity, knowledge, patience and kindness. And we have an armory of the Holy Spirit—*agape* love, the word of truth, the power of God—to affect people’s lives. That’s what it’s all about.

I have been struck by the questions swirling around in the news media about our country. Are we suffering a constitutional crisis? Is democracy somehow threatened by the indecision in the elections? I doubt it. As Christians, we do not put our trust ultimately in legislators or electoral processes or the office of presidency. The apostle Paul faced a culture that was even more anti-Christian than ours, a corrupt and dying Roman Empire. Paul faced the political system with weapons of prayer, faith, love, biblical truth-speaking, and consistently righteous behavior. Paul was a servant of God in much endurance, maintaining a righteous lifestyle regardless of the popular attitude toward him and even when there were misunderstandings about his character.

The first phrase of verse 8 says, “by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report....” Issues of success and reputation should not unsettle us or change our approach to life and ministry. *The Message* paraphrases this verse, “When we’re praised, and when we’re blamed; slandered, and honored....” Paul says that no one’s opinion of him makes any difference. He knows his life is pleasing to God because he lives by faith, not depending on himself or trying to look successful. Paul has no personal ambition or agenda in his ministry so it does not matter whether it is good times or bad times, whether he is believed or unappreciated, criticized or affirmed. He trusts God to be at work in him, changing him, and making him effective in the ministry to which he is committed.

Human perception vs. divine reality of our ministry as “servants of God”

Paul closes this section with a series of paradoxical statements about our identity. It’s prefaced in the middle of verse 8 with the word “regarded.” It refers to how we are viewed or evaluated in our lifestyle and ministry. We could make a list of the human perception, how the world views us; and another the divine reality, how God views us. Observe the contrasts: “regarded as deceivers *and yet true*; as unknown *yet well-known*, as dying *yet behold, we live*; as punished *yet not put to death*, as sorrowful *yet always rejoicing*, as poor *yet making many rich*, as having nothing *yet possessing all things*” [italics added for emphasis].

The contrast is between how the world evaluates us on a purely physical level, and how God sees us. The world can see us as “deceivers.” When we share our faith, sometimes we can be accused of violating the individual or being disingenuous in cultivating friendship. But the spiritual reality is that we bring eternal life to people who desperately need to know about life in Christ.

Verse 9 says we are “unknown.” In contrast to Hillary Clinton, the women in our congregation are obscure. But the spiritual reality is that as daughters of the King and servants of God they are well known by him as his beloved children. We are well known in the circle of relationships and ministry in which God has placed us. We are important and have value because God knows and loves us.

The third contrast says, “...as dying.” As followers of Christ, we can look powerless and impotent to the world. We are not power mongers or power brokers. We give up our rights and die to ourselves, and it makes no sense to the world. Paul says the reality is that we live. We live in Christ and experience the fullness of his life, joy, and power. We understand the paradox of fullness of life out of death, and of dying to self.

I think “Punished but not put to death” addresses Paul’s own limitations during his imprisonments. People might look at his reputation and say, “He has no influence at all. He is a criminal and a political trouble-maker.” But Paul says the reality is that we are “not put to death.” We live the abundant life Jesus gives whether we are in prison or out of prison; whether we are limited physically, or have total freedom to live life. We do not die, we live life to the full.

I wrestle with the issue of being “sorrowful yet always rejoicing.” As believers, we could appear sorrowful to the world because we take sin seriously. We grieve for the state of our lost world. There is violence, internationally and domestically, even in our own neighborhoods. We grieve over religious bigotry, racial strife, social injustice, drug and alcohol abuse, and the disintegration of the family. All of these things cause us to be sorrowful because of the cost in human suffering. However, we trust in a God who is completely in control, we can always rejoice because his plans and purposes are perfect. We are confident in the fact that he has not lost control over anything and is accomplishing his plan of salvation in spite of the gut-wrenching things going on around us.

“As poor yet making many rich.” As Christians, we can look strange to the world because we live lives of self-denial in contrast to the excess in our materialistic world. But we have incredible spiritual resources to give away to enrich the people around us. We can give them the spiritual wealth of a relationship to Christ, through the word of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We have something for people that matters so much more than what the physical and material world offers.

Finally, “as having nothing yet possessing all things” addresses the issue of stewardship. We do not personally own anything, we are not about “stuff.” Whatever we have been entrusted with is God’s, and we are to manage it for him. We are to be good stewards of the assets and resources he gives us, but we do not measure ourselves by the stuff we possess. The reality is that we possess all things. Paul reminds the poor Christians in Philippi that God would supply all their needs in Christ (4:19). The physical, material world is no evidence of the unlimited riches we have in Christ. That far surpasses anything the world can offer us.

When we work through the paradox of the seven things listed there, we have to admit that our life in Christ is enigmatic. It is mysterious to people who watch us, but to people who are in the process of being drawn to the Lord, we will be interesting because they will see authenticity. They will not understand us, but they will find us fascinating. They will see a vitality that only Jesus can give, a zest for living that only comes from him. We are servants of God, and our lifestyle and character is being watched.

Let me close with the concluding section from Charles Colson’s challenge about the cliffhanger elections.

People need to see something better, something that they can long for in our lives [as Christians]. That isn't affected by elections. They're not going to look to Washington for that, they're going to look to us.

So we keep living in biblical faithfulness. And remember, too, that God appoints the leaders. And that whatever happens in the elections that's now being tallied, we have to accept God's sovereign judgment.

We have to pray for those in authority. We have to respect those whom God has put in power over us, and live peaceably in the midst of whatever government we have. The first century church had to do that; the twenty-first century church ought to be doing exactly the same thing.

Don't be overly jubilant, but don't despair. Take a cool-headed perspective and keep your Christian faith and your Christian witness strong. (2)

Remember the words of Mother Theresa. The goal is "faithfulness, not success." We have enlisted for the duration in service to the truth.

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NOTES:

(1) Colson, Charles. *Breakpoint With Charles Colson, Commentary #00108*. 2000 Prison Fellowship Ministries, 11/8/00.

(2) Ibid.

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