

This morning, I am in the sixth week of my sermon series entitled “Strength in Weakness,” looking at the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians. If you are unfamiliar with this book, it is a letter written by an early church leader named Paul to a church he had started around the year 50 AD in the Greek city of Corinth, which in Paul’s day was part of the Roman Empire. As we have seen in the first few chapters, after Paul moved on from Corinth to start other churches, the relationship between Paul and the church became strained, and so throughout this letter, we see Paul having to defend himself against false teachers who have been slandering him and remind the Corinthians of his love for them and devotion to them.

Today we will be in chapter 6:3 – 7:1, a passage that begins with Paul addressing his relationship with the Corinthians, and then continues with a challenge from Paul to the Corinthians about the partnerships in their life. Before we read, let’s pray that the Lord would speak to us through His Word.

Let’s take it one section at a time:

*³ We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. ⁴ Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ⁶ in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; ⁸ through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet **regarded as impostors**; ⁹ known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. ¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. ¹² We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. ¹³ As a fair exchange-- I speak as to my children-- open wide your hearts also.*

I have to admit that the first verse in this passage slayed me as I was preparing to preach. I shed a lot of tears this week as I meditated on verse 3. Paul uses the imagery of a stumbling block, which is just what it sounds like, an object that would cause someone to trip and fall if their foot were to strike it as they walk along a path. And Paul tells them that he and his ministry team have not put any stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that their ministry, the ministry of

reconciliation that he talked about in the previous passage, would not be discredited.

So why did this verse slay me? Consider:

- 1) The gospel of Jesus is the most important message you will ever hear, for your response to it has eternal consequences

In case you were not here last week, or do not remember the passage, listen to what Paul says about the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ:

*2 Corinthians 5:17-21 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: **Be reconciled to God.** ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

How much is packed into this short passage! What is the main call to the people? Be reconciled to God! Reconciliation is the restoration of a relationship where there has been enmity, opposition. It implies that our natural state is one of hostility to God. We want to do our own thing and be our own masters. We do not want a God to whom we are accountable. But God did not leave us alone in our rebellion and sin, but sent His eternal Son Jesus to live and die for us and rise again, conquering sin and death. And just look at the results of this sacrifice in this short section! Remember what I said last week: when you put your faith in Jesus, you are **justified** – the legal act of God in which He thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us and declares us to be righteous in His sight. You are **adopted** – the act of God whereby He makes us members of His family. And you are **regenerated** – the act of God by which He imparts spiritual (eternal) life to us. This message is the most important message you will ever hear. I don't care if you miss the Super Bowl tonight – do not miss this! Do you understand that your eternal destiny and the destiny of every person in this world depends upon this! You have been offered reconciliation to God, and you have been given a purpose, the ministry of reconciliation, to bring others to God. But this all depends upon your reaction to it, whether you are willing to repent – turn away from your sins and self-centeredness, and believe this gospel.

John 3:16-18 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Why did this verse slay me? Because first of all, this message is the most important message you will ever hear. Secondly:

2) The gospel of Jesus itself can be a stumbling block

Remember what Paul wrote in his last letter:

1 Corinthians 1:22-24 - Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

He says that the gospel is a stumbling block to Jews, for it proclaims that the Messiah was not a conquering military hero but conquered sin and death through dying on the cross for our sins and rising again. And it is foolishness to the Gentiles, for it proclaims the resurrection of the body. The gospel message still offends today. It is still difficult to believe. It declares that you can not save yourself through your own good works, that even Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and any other good person is lost apart from trusting in Jesus. It declares that you are not god, that you do not get to determine what is right and what is wrong, you do not get to choose how to live, but that there is a God who has created you and has declared what is right and what is wrong, and that we need to find out what that is and submit to it. [It is offensive because it declares that there is one way to be saved, and that is through trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And thirdly:

3) I love you and God loves you and we both want you to be saved!

1 Timothy 2:3-4 - This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Put those three things together, and can you understand why verse 1 slays me? Helping someone believe the gospel is hard enough. I don't want to make it harder by putting a stumbling block in anyone's path! **I don't want to be a reason for people to reject God, or give up on his church!** I don't want my conduct to be a reason for someone to reject Him. I don't want to say anything false about Him. I don't want my lack of love, or my lack of prayer to be a contributor to someone's lack of faith.

Paul declares that he has put no stumbling block in anyone's way. I wish I could say the same. I take seriously both my calling and the influence I have for better or worse, but I know I have not always taken them as seriously as I should. I do take my need for accountability very seriously, and make sure that I am never going more than a week or two at the most without talking to someone about my walk with the Lord. I take my sexual purity and relational integrity seriously, for I have seen too many pastors fall to temptation in those areas. How many churches have been damaged by a pastor's infidelity? How many people have been disillusioned in their faith because of a church leader's lack of control in this area? I do my best to live with integrity in other areas as well – with my finances, with the things I post online, with the way I interact with people inside and outside the church, because it all matters, and I do not want to put a stumbling block in anyone's path. This message is too important, and your eternal destiny matters too much!

But the reality is that I still have many areas where God is still maturing me, where I have hurt others. My fears and my sinful tendencies have sadly caused me to be a stumbling block in the faith of others. **Over the years I have seen some websites where people who have left churches band together to explain how they were hurt by the pastor or church leadership.** I have read those soberly, knowing that there are people who have left this church who could put together sites about me, listing ways that I have hurt them and let them down. There are ways that I have been a stumbling block to others through my conduct, my teaching, and my lack of love or my lack of prayer, and that has been the cause of many tears this week. **If I have done that to you, I would ask you for your forgiveness, and I would be willing to sit and listen to what you have to share.** I thank God every day for His mercy, and I would ask you to pray for me, that God would continue to transform me into a man of integrity and faithfulness. I know that many of you have been a part of churches where the conduct of leaders has been a stumbling block to you, or maybe to your spouse or your children. I pray that that would not be true of me and of our leaders.

And I want to encourage all of you who have that kind of influence over another human being, whether as a parent or grandparent, an uncle or aunt, an older

sibling, an older believer in the Lord, or leader in the church, to take this verse to heart. Before this day ends, get on your knees and cry out for God's mercy for how you have been a stumbling block to others, and pray for His help, that God might transform you by His Spirit into a person of integrity and faithfulness, that your life might shine with the radiance of the glory of the gospel, that you might point people to Jesus. Don't be afraid to ask for forgiveness if you have been a stumbling block in the life of another person. And trust that Christ's death is enough to justify you, to pay the penalty for your sins.

Moving on to verses 4-13: Paul loves the Corinthian church, and he wants them to know Christ, and so instead of putting any stumbling blocks in their way, he proclaims that he and his team have conducted themselves in **integrity** and **faithfulness** through every possible circumstance that they have faced. He lists hardships, and opposition, and trials. He talks about the good times and the hard times, the suffering and the struggles. But he proclaims that none of that alters his vision – they have commended themselves through it all as God's servants. They have stayed on mission and conducted themselves with integrity and faithfulness as they proclaim the gospel, the ministry of reconciliation.

And he pleads with them to open their hearts to him, to not withhold their affection from him, because he loves them and is devoted wholeheartedly to them. He earnestly desires that they would get past their disagreements and begin to love and trust each other again, and pursue Christ together.

I want to say that by God's grace, I have been the pastor of this church for over 14 years. I know that God could call me to serve somewhere else whenever He pleases. But until that day, my wife Michele and I are dedicated to loving and serving you, and to doing our best to walk with integrity before you. I want to particularly mention my wife. I can relate to v. 4-13 as I have watched her persevere and strive to love and serve this church through so many trials and hardships. She keeps getting off the mat and coming back to serve, and she deserves more honor than I can give for that. And I also want to commend the elders, the care & connect team, the community group leaders, and all who have opened their hearts to serve and love the people of this church as well. I encourage you to open your hearts, to join together with us in serving this church body, and through this church body, to love and serve the world.

Moving on to v. 14. Because Paul loves them and is devoted to them, he has permission to speak hard truths to them, to confront them with their sin:

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?* ¹⁵ *What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?* ¹⁶ *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."* ¹⁷ *"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."* ¹⁸ *"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."* ^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 7:1** *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.*

Once again, the first verse sets the tone and sums up his exhortation. Paul tells them, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." Or, do not be unequally yoked. Not egg yolk, but the yoke that connects two animals, such as oxen, so that they can pull a plow in the same direction. Paul tells them not to form a partnership with someone or with a group who is pulling in a different direction, towards different goals than you, away from integrity and faithfulness to God. He tells them that there is no agreement between Christ and Belial, another name for Satan. Instead, he tells them to purify themselves from everything that contaminates, and to perfect holiness out of reverence for God. He tells them to be set apart for God's use.

In the context, when Paul refers to not being yoked together with unbelievers, it is most likely that he is referring to idol worship, or eating food that has been sacrificed to an idol. That was something he addressed in 1 Corinthians, his other letter to them. But instead of diving back into that argument here, he simply tells them not to enter into a partnership with someone who is going after a different god or who has a different ultimate goal in life than yours. Do not knit your heart to someone who is looking to something other than God to be their ultimate source of satisfaction, joy, and righteousness. Align yourself with the wrong person and you can be led astray.

1 Corinthians 15:33-34 - *Do not be misled: "Bad **company** corrupts good **character**."* ³⁴ *Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God-- I say this to your shame.*

Some of you need to hear this, for the friends that you have or the partnerships you have in your life are not pulling in God's direction, and as you join with them, they are pulling you off course. It is one thing to be friendly with someone like that. It is

another thing to be yoked to them. Do not knit your hearts to theirs. Do not be yoked together with them. Do not bind yourself to them in such a way that you will be pulled away from God.

For those of you who are single, this is particularly important advice when it comes to dating. If your supreme treasure is God, don't unite yourself with someone who does not share that outlook, or life is going to be a tug-of-war.

Now, some of you are struggling to hear this passage because you are married to someone who does not share your faith, does not share your goal of pursuing God. But Paul addressed this in his last letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 7:12-16 - To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶ How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

When Paul says they are sanctified, he is telling these wives that the unbelieving husband does not contaminate you; rather, **the believer brings their spouse into the presence of God in a way that is more powerful**. So stay where you are if it is possible and try to live in peace – you may save your husband or wife.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. Does this apply to business relationships? It could. If your goal is to honor God first and foremost, even before making a profit, and your partner's goal is to make a profit, even if that means compromising ethically, then you might be unequally yoked.

I challenge you to take time today to consider the partnerships you have made in your life and whether they are pulling you towards God or in a different direction. Tech companies. Political involvement. The food you eat. The podcasts you listen to. The shows you watch. The apps or websites you frequent. Do not give your heart to something that is pulling you away from God.

Paul finishes with these words:

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.

What would it look like to do that kind of inventory of your life? What would it look like to purify yourself, to make your life about God? When he becomes your singular focus, then the influences of this world that do not share your goal begin to lose their appeal. Anything that contaminates body and spirit is not helping you but is detracting from the person God has called you to be. Align yourself with the wrong person and you can be led astray. Align yourself with people who are pulling towards Christ and you can live a life of integrity. This is why we encourage participation in community groups. This is why it is so important to be in community with other believers, to open wide your heart to people who have the same goal that you do.

Jesus came that you might have life to the fullest; the thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Do not go after those things that will fade away. The gospel is worth it. God is worth it. Surround yourself with people who are pulling in the same direction.