

No Obstacle in Anyone's Way

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we start this morning, I want to share a few stories I found on the internet where some companies hired celebrities to promote their products, only things didn't always go so well. The first is Brylcreem. One of the most popular hair styling products in Britain hired famous soccer player and British icon David Beckham to promote their product. Great move on their part. Unfortunately, Beckham decided to shave his head about halfway through his four-year contract, making it impossible for him to promote their product, and costing Brylcreem a huge amount of lost revenue.

A second story is about Samsung who hired LeBron James to promote their smartphones. Incredible opportunity for them. Unfortunately, on one occasion when his phone malfunctioned, James decided to tweet: *"My phone just erased everything it had in it and rebooted. One of the sickest feelings I've ever had in my life!!!"* He quickly realized what he'd done and deleted the Tweet, but not before causing a huge PR nightmare for Samsung to deal with.

Then there's the story of Charles Barkley who was hired to endorse Weight Watchers. He was a great spokesperson. However, while he was announcing a nationally televised basketball game, he accidentally called Weight Watchers a scam – probably referring to the fact he gets paid all kinds of money just to promote their company, but it sure didn't come across that way!

And then finally, probably the best example – the rental car company Hertz enjoyed a hugely successful ad campaign when they hired the biggest name in sports to promote their company – Buffalo Bills running back O.J. Simpson. O.J. drove Hertz's profits and brand awareness through the roof. That is, until 1994 when he was charged with killing both his ex-wife Nicole Brown and her friend, Ron Goldman. As you can imagine, things took a sudden turn after that.

When someone is hired to promote your company or product, you're banking on them being a good representative who will help your cause. But there are times when it can have the opposite effect and actually turn people away. I

wonder how it goes with us and the gospel? I want us to think about what kind of representatives we're being for the kingdom of heaven. How well are we promoting the cause of Christ here on earth? Are we helping, or having the opposite effect?

Last week we looked at how we are part of the greatest reconciliation story ever told. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul wrote that God made him who knew no sin to be sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Through Christ's death, God is reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us. When we turn to him in faith, we have forgiveness and peace with God! But Paul also wrote that we have an important part to play. When God reconciles us to himself, he also calls us to take part in the ministry of reconciliation. Paul described himself as an ambassador for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We are his representatives and promoters here on earth. How well are we doing in that role?

I want us to see how important that is and how seriously we should take it. We're going to look at why it was so important to Paul and how carefully he treated his role and we're going to see a lot of similarities that can challenge and inspire us. Having just described himself as an ambassador for Christ, Paul now describes one of the reasons that role was so important.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

The situation in Corinth was that there were false teachers who were trying to convince the believers to turn to Judaism instead of Christ. They were also opposed to Paul and trying to undermine his credibility so that the people would no longer listen to him or believe the gospel.

This was very concerning to Paul, so as he begins this chapter he appeals to the church to not receive the grace of God in vain. The grace of God was given to them in Jesus Christ and through the preaching of the gospel. They had heard the message and believed, and God had richly blessed them. But now

the false teachers were enticing them to turn away and believe a different message. If they did, God's grace would be in vain. They would be throwing it out the window.

Paul quotes from Isaiah 48:9 which was a prophecy about God's salvation through the Messiah for the people Israel. God heard their prayers and had favor upon them. He sent them the Messiah to save them. And Paul was saying to the Corinthian believers that God had shown them favor in the same way. Jesus was God's one and only way of salvation – "now is the favorable time; now is the day of salvation."

There is an urgency as Paul realized the door was open and the opportunity to receive salvation and be reconciled to God was before them. This was extremely important, and because of that, his role as a faithful ambassador was also extremely important. And that's where he'll go next. As ambassador's for Christ we aren't just trying to help a company make more money, we're taking God's appeal for eternal salvation into the world and to people who have limited time. Now is the day of salvation. People need to hear the gospel. And there is nothing more important that we can promote and represent. Therefore, it's vitally important that we take our role seriously and don't do what the celebrities did in the stories I told earlier. Paul took this very seriously and we see that throughout the rest of our passage for this morning.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:3.

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,

Paul didn't want to be a reason for someone to turn away from God's way of salvation. He didn't want to be a stumbling block. Ultimately every person has to make their own decision about whether or not they will follow Christ, and they'll be held responsible for it, but Paul didn't want to trip anyone up. He didn't want to be at fault. He didn't want to be one of the reasons someone rejected Christ.

Do you? I think about my kids. Pastor's kids can have the tendency to go off the deep end, and one of the reasons they do is because they know who their

dad really is. I don't want to be an obstacle that my kids have to get over in order to trust in Jesus. I don't want to be a hypocrite. I don't want to make it harder for my neighbors to come to Christ or for the people who know I'm a Christian in this community. It's vitally important that we put no obstacle in anyone's way.

Now, I want to be clear that doesn't mean we water down the gospel to try to make it less offensive like appears to be happening in a lot of churches. The gospel itself can be an obstacle because it exposes our sinfulness and rebellion against God. That is offensive to people with closed ears and hard hearts. And even though we need to use wisdom and humility with how we share the gospel, we don't water it down to make it more palatable. Sharing the truth of the gospel is not the kind of obstacle Paul was talking about. He's talking about hypocritical and offensive behavior that isn't worthy of the gospel.

So Paul was very careful to not put those kinds of obstacles in anyone's way as he did ministry. He wanted to be above reproach, and the way he did that is what he describes as he goes on. He lists 4 different things. The first is in Vs. 4-5.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:4-5.

but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger;

If Paul and his team would have given up on gospel ministry because of all the suffering they went through, that would have been a major obstacle to all the people they preached to, many of whom were going through the same kinds of sufferings. But they didn't give up. They endured through all those things he mentioned, and by doing so it confirmed the worth and truthfulness of their message, and didn't create an obstacle.

Endurance in suffering is really important because it shows people whether or not the gospel is real and if God's presence and strength in our lives is real. Is God's power in us, or are we just like everyone else? The way we respond to suffering will show it. It also shows if we truly trust in God and believe in our

future hope. Do we believe what we say we believe, or do we give in to fear and despair?

So Paul was careful to endure in gospel ministry. He was also careful about the fruit or character that was being displayed in his life.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:6.

by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love;

Paul and his team exhibited characteristics that corresponded with the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The fruit of the Spirit was evident in them along with the power of the Spirit. If they demonstrated the works of the flesh, it would have been a major stumbling block for people. But they didn't.

Galatians 5:19-23 says: *“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”*

Is that the fruit that people see in us? Or do they see the works of the flesh? If we promote Christ with our lips, but live in the flesh, we become a major obstacle. Ambassadors for Christ must be different.

Paul was also careful about how he conducted himself in preaching the gospel, and he references that in verse 7.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:7.

by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left

We read earlier in 2 Corinthians 4:2 that Paul wouldn't resort to human manipulation to gain a following like so many teachers were doing in Corinth: *“But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of*

the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.”

Paul relied on speaking the truth of the gospel, and the power of God through prayer. And I think these were the weapons of righteousness that he relied on to persuade people to follow Christ. Not his own persuasive speaking ability. This was another way he was careful not to put an obstacle in anyone's way, because if someone responds to the gospel just because we're good at persuading or pressuring them to make some kind of decision, we've just convinced them that they're saved even though they might not be. And that's a huge obstacle we don't want to create. As bad as we want people to believe and be saved, they have to respond to the clear truth and because God is doing something deep inside them and not just because we're good at convincing them.

The final way that Paul describes how he and his team did not put obstacles in anyone's way, is that no matter how they were being treated, it didn't effect who they were in Christ. It didn't crush them. They were unwavering because they stood firm in Christ.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:8-10.

through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

So I think he's saying that whether they were being honored or dishonored, or slandered or praised, they stood firm. Paul and his team faced all kinds of accusations and mistreatment that we just read about, but none of it crushed them or changed who they really were. They stood firm in Christ and therefore put no obstacle in anyone's way.

Do we stand firm when we're being maligned and mistreated and thus prove that the accusations are false? Or do we fall apart and confirm that what people are saying just might be true? As ambassadors, we are who we are in

Christ and that doesn't change when we're mistreated. Standing firm sends a clear message that discredits our opponents.

Endurance, the fruit of the Spirit, truthful speech, standing firm – all ways Paul was careful and above reproach as an ambassador. Paul finishes by with a summary and appeal to go along with these things.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:11-13.

¹¹We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹²You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

I think Paul is expressing his vulnerability and affection for them – he's held nothing back in trying to win them to Christ. It wasn't his lack of affection that was pushing them away, it was their own. So he calls them to open their hearts to him.

Paul didn't do anything to put an obstacle in anyone's way that would make it harder for them to receive God's way of salvation. He was very serious about his role as an ambassador for Christ.

Are you like Paul? Or more like the celebrities from earlier on?

I want to acknowledge that for all of us, there have been times when we've screwed up. And this message is in no way meant to heap on a burden of guilt for past failures. The amazing thing about the power and grace of God is that he is able to overcome all of our failures. No one will ultimately reject Jesus or the way of salvation because you messed up in your role as an ambassador. Praise God. Confess your sin, repent, and move forward.

But what about as we move forward? What should be our aim? I think the Holy Spirit would compel us to become like the Apostle Paul and resolve to put no obstacle in anyone's way, to take our role as Christ's ambassadors very seriously, and to do what we can to represent him really, really well.

We are on duty whenever we're out in public – at the grocery store, on the highway, in the bleachers. But even when we're in our own homes. Our

children are watching to see what we're really like, and who we are has an impact on what they think about what we say we believe. We're also on duty when we get on our phones and start making posts or comments on social media. You are an ambassador for Christ. What you say about the elections and about the nominees really matters. So be careful. Put no obstacle in anyone's way.

By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, may we be ever aware of what we're doing and who we're representing so that Christ will be glorified and the way of salvation open to those we're trying to reach.