

Paul believed that the Corinthians had experienced reconciliation with God through the gospel, but he was also painfully aware that they had not yet embraced reconciliation to him through the same gospel. Rejecting him, they also rejected his message of reconciliation. As we have seen, they rejected him because, through the influence of the superapostles, they struggled to understand how a true minister of Christ could face such extraordinary suffering (see 1:3–11). Surely God’s favour would shine on his servants, and since it did not seem to shine on Paul, they had a hard time taking his ministry seriously.

Having shown that the opposition he faced was nothing more than “momentary light affliction” in light of resurrection glory (4:16–5:10),⁰⁰ and having argued that he was indeed called to true new covenant ministry (5:11–6:2), he now returns to the familiar theme of showing that his afflictions actually validated, rather than invalidated, his ministry.

The Claim to Authentic Ministry (vv. 3–4a)

Having just explained what the message of the gospel is that he preaches, which results in reconciliation between sinners and God, Paul now claims that he and his fellow ministers “put no obstacle in anyone’s way.” Contextually, he seems to be talking of obstacles to someone believing and being reconciled. His gospel was a pure, unadulterated gospel ministry.

TO THINK ABOUT

The gospel message itself can be a stumbling block to some (see 1 Corinthians 1:23), but Paul was determined to not put any further unnecessary obstacles in the way of those to whom he ministered. What kinds of obstacles can we sometimes be guilty of placing in the way of our gospel proclamation?

Paul earlier (3:1) denied that he was trying to commend himself to the Corinthians, but here he writes, “As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way.” He does not contradict himself here, but is talking of two very different types of commendation. In the first instance (3:1), he argues that he needs no form of external or self-promoting commendation, for the fruit of his ministry was commendation enough. Here, he argues that the way he responded to ministerial trials (vv. 4b–10) was proof of his genuineness. While his critics argued that his trials were evidence that he was an impostor, he argues that those very trials—and the way he responded to them—showed Christlike character and philosophy.

“That various accusations should have been leveled against Paul was inevitable, given the success of his ministry and the jealousy of men. His concern was that such charges should be totally without foundation, that no ‘minister of reconciliation’ should be guilty of inconsistent or dishonest conduct, and that no handle be given adversaries who wished to ridicule or malign the gospel. The life of the Christian minister is the most eloquent advertisement for the gospel.”

(Murray J. Harris)

The Characteristics of Authentic Ministry (vv. 4b–10)

Paul sought “in every way” to bear witness to his authentic ministry, but here he particularly draws attention to his “great endurance” as evidence of this. He seems to do so in response to the criticism of the superapostles that trials are evidence of God’s disfavour. In vv. 4b–10 he draws attention to four manifestations of endurance, which pointed to the genuineness of his ministry.

1. **Endurance in trouble (vv. 4b–5).** First, Paul could claim that he had endured through all forms of trouble. He lists three categories of troubles that he faced—general troubles (“afflictions, hardships, calamities”), troubles inflicted by others (“beatings, imprisonments, riots,”), and self-inflicted troubles (“labours, sleepless nights, hunger”). Regardless of the source of trouble, he could claim “great endurance” in the face of it all.

TO THINK ABOUT

In what way can endurance in trouble manifest authentic ministry. Is there a danger that endurance will magnify self rather than God? If so, how do we avoid that danger?

2. **Endurance by grace (vv. 6–7a).** Second, he writes of some of the things by which his “great endurance” was characterised: “purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, ... genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.” The placement of “the Holy Spirit” in the middle of these list of graces shows that they were not natural virtues but gifts of the Holy Spirit. He endured only by Spirit-enabled grace.

TO THINK ABOUT

R. Kent Hughes writes, “Paul wants us to see that his great endurance in ministry is not an angry, tight-jawed, ‘I’ll show you’ endurance, but rather his endurance ... had a Spirit-endowed sweetness.” How do we manifest Spirit-produce endurance rather than self-righteous, survivor-spirit endurance that is proud of its own inner grit?

3. **Endurance by righteousness (vv. 7b–8a).** Third, Paul was able to endure “with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left.” Contextually, he seems to be highlighting his practical righteousness, rather than the righteousness that was imputed to him at justification. His message of imputed righteousness (5:21) was supported by a life of practical righteousness. While he was no stranger to accusations, there was no genuine moral or ethical failure in his life that detracted from his message.

Paul’s personal righteousness enabled him to endure whether people treated him with honour or dishonour, and whether they slandered him or praised him. It gave him a clear conscience, by which he could fight the good fight of faith (cf. 1 Timothy 1:18–19).

“Righteousness is at the heart of gospel endurance. That is how Christ endured the cross. And when it remains firm amidst the afflictions that shower upon God’s servants, Christ is exalted. Righteousness for the right hand and the left, for all of life, is a chief means of declaring the reality of Christ.”

(R. Kent Hughes)

4. **Endurance in paradox (vv. 8b–10).** Fourth, Paul speaks of his endurance even in the paradoxes of life and ministry. His critics accused him of being an impostor, but he could endure knowing that he was true before God. Even though he, once a famed Pharisee of Pharisees, became a nonentity in Jewish religious circles (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:13), he could endure because he was known of God. Even though he was being persecuted to death, he had a living hope of future resurrection. Even though he was punished by man and chastened by God, he endured as one still living and ministering. Even though he experienced great sorrow, he could endure because his joy was in the Lord. Even though he was poor and needed to work hard to provide for his own needs, he was rich in Christ. His endurance in the face of all these things validated his ministry.

The Call to Authentic Ministry (vv. 11–13)

The Corinthians were now faced with a choice: They could continue to believe the slanderous lies of Paul’s critics, who called his character and ministry into question, or they could look at his track record of “great endurance” and see in it that he was living out the life of Christ. His endurance in the face of opposition, his reliance on the grace of God, his personal righteousness, and his endurance in the paradoxes of life were evidence of genuine ministry. The superapostles could not claim the same.

Things have not changed. Faithful endurance still commends the gospel to the church and to a watching world. We are still called to endure sufferings for the sake of the gospel, enduring only through Spirit-given grace and through personal righteousness. And even when life doesn’t make sense, our endurance demonstrates that faith in Christ is real and that we believe he is worthy of our full allegiance.

TO THINK ABOUT

There is something insidious in human nature, which loves a good scandal. Like the Corinthians, we are quick to believe unfounded criticisms against people whom God has placed in our lives, particularly people of leadership and influence. How does Paul’s impassioned defence here shape the way that you think about criticisms that are levelled against whom God has placed over you? Do these verses help you to evaluate criticism in order to either affirm it or reject it?