

## The Ambassadorial Job Description

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2 Corinthians 6:3-13

In 2 Corinthians 5:20 we read:

*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.*

As Rusdyan encouraged us last week, all of us have been called to this most distinguished task. What an honour to be sent into the world with *this* message of reconciliation. It's exciting and daunting. Throughout this letter itself, the apostle Paul himself asks several times, "Who is equal to the task?"

But we might find ourselves asking an even more fundamental question: "What *is* the task?!" Yes, we know our job *title*, "Ambassadors." And we know our message, "Be reconciled to God." But *how* exactly are we to go about this role in our everyday lives?

Well, you could describe our passage for today in 2 Corinthians 6 as the *Ambassadorial Job Description*. It sets before us a picture of the faithful ambassador and their work. And it poses some probing questions to us, prompting us and provoking us to consider how we might live as Christ's ambassadors in the world.

It's not for the faint-hearted, but as we'll see, it's the best job in the world. Are you ready? 2 Corinthians 6:3-13.

<sup>3</sup> We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. <sup>4</sup> Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; <sup>5</sup> in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; <sup>6</sup> in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; <sup>7</sup> in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; <sup>8</sup> through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; <sup>9</sup> known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup> sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

<sup>11</sup> We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. <sup>12</sup> We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. <sup>13</sup> As a fair exchange –I speak as to my children–open wide your hearts also.

Today, we will consider how this passage sets before us:

- *Three clear tasks, and*
- *Three probing questions*

## Three clear tasks

First, in this picture of Paul's apostolic ministry, I think we see three clear tasks which the ambassador of Christ is to perform:

Open the path, open your mouth, open your heart.

So look again at verse 3, as Paul testifies to the basic task of his ministry:

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path...

Here's the first task: **open the path**. Clear the way. Remove any and all obstacles that stand between people encountering Christ in the gospel.

And you could start making a list pretty quickly of all the stumbling blocks that Christians have left on the road:

Gross moral failure

Rampant hypocrisy

Ugly defensiveness

Theological compromise

Complacent worldliness

Superficial moralism

Lack of mercy and forgiveness

You could go on and on.

And, perhaps counterintuitively, from 2 Corinthians it would seem one of the biggest stumbling blocks is a church overly concerned with outward appearance, rather than what is in the heart. The sort of pursuit of power that owes far more to a desire for control, than the humble service fitting for followers of Jesus Christ.

And Paul says emphatically, he has done no such thing. You could paraphrase verse 3, "we ain't done nothing to block nobody."

Even the stumbling block language itself is really interesting. For in the New Testament, a common way of speaking about Christ himself, is as a stumbling block.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote:

"We proclaim Christ crucified, a *stumbling block* to the Jews, foolishness to the Gentiles."

Drawing on the prophet Isaiah, Peter says that Jesus is a stone that causes people to *stumble*, a rock that makes them *fall*.

Here's the picture I think this gives us:

We run ahead, we clear every obstacle, we remove every stumbling block, we open up the path so that then people...

Run into Jesus and stumble over *him!*

Let it be the Cross of Christ that jolts people out of their distraction, and complacency, and sin. Some will stumble and reject the message of Jesus as a great offence. But others, in stumbling, will fall to the feet of Jesus and call out for his help and receive salvation. To some it will seem utter foolishness, to others the very power and wisdom of God.

As we will see in a few minutes, opening up the path does not mean our message will *never be rejected*. It does mean however that we make every effort to remove the possibility that people will reject the gospel for any other reason than their rejection of Jesus himself.

Here is our task: open up the path for people to encounter Jesus.

Clear the way. Put Christ on display.

Which leads us to our next two tasks.

Look at verse 11,

*We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.*

We are called to **open our mouths** and **open our hearts**. And these two things are so intertwined as to be inseparable.

We proclaim Christ, and we care about people.

We share the good news of Jesus in our words, and show it in our actions.

We open up the Bible, and we open our lives.

Just so we're clear: we tell people about Jesus, not out of mere duty, but out of a deep love for other people. A love that recognises the greatest gift we could ever offer someone is the hope of being reconciled with the God of the universe.

A mission compelled and constrained by the love of Christ, must itself be characterised by love. And by telling people about that love which has completely reordered our lives. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 is the perfect commentary on this verse:

*Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.*

Open mouths. Open hearts.

I think one of the biggest reasons we find telling people about Jesus more of a burden than a blessing, is we've bought into a whole heap of false assumptions about what evangelism actually is.

My guess is that if I asked you to think about the characteristics of an "evangelist" you might think of a guy, with the gift of the gab, corny lines, quick answers to all your questions, maybe even a little pushy or rude. Basically, a door-to-door salesman selling Jesus rather than a cheaper price on your electricity. Who wants to do that?!

But what if I asked you to list the characteristics of the person, or people, who were most influential in *your* coming to Christ? I'm sure we'd have many answers. A parent, who lovingly told you about Jesus since you were a kid. A brother or sister who pointed you to Jesus when you weren't sure where to turn. A friend patiently listened to your questions and awkwardly answered by inviting you to some thing at his church. A minister, or a youth leader, or a Scripture teacher, who took a genuine interest in your life even as they told you about Jesus from the Bible. All of us will have different stories, but my guess is that most of us will think of someone who didn't judge you, who listened to you, who took your and your questions seriously, who welcomed you into their home, who was there when things were hard. Someone who *loved you*.

I read just this week the story of how an old dude called Augustine became a Christian. Augustine was a Bishop in northern Africa in the 4th century. And he came to Christ later in life through the ministry of a man called Ambrose, who was the Bishop of Milan. Augustine was desperately in search of the truth, but he was entirely convinced that the truth was NOT going to be found in Christianity. But listen to what he says about the beginning of his coming to faith:

*"I fell in love with him, as it were, not at first as a teacher of the truth—as I had no hope for that whatsoever in your church—but **simply as a person who was kind to me.**"*

Isn't that beautiful? It's the work of an Ambassador of Christ!

He opened wide his heart, he spoke freely of Jesus, and slowly removed the obstacles out of the way, until – by God's grace – Augustine stumbled on the love of God revealed in the cross of Christ and was saved.

One writer poses this exciting question:

*I can't help wondering what would happen if ... Christians of ... en masse started confessing their faith openly. Not going on a crusade against sexual immorality or whatever – but simply saying that they believe that Jesus is Lord and that they hope to serve Him, which means to love the Lord their God with all their heart and all their soul and all their mind, and love their neighbours as themselves...*

What would happen?!

Brothers and sisters, here is the Ambassadorial job description:

OPEN UP THE WAY, OPEN YOUR MOUTH, OPEN WIDE YOUR HEART.

## Three Probing Questions

That's the big picture we're given at the beginning and the end of our passage. It's the sketched outline, if you like. And in verses 4-10 this picture is filled in in glorious – and slightly gory – technicolour.

In the context of the letter, these verses are the climactic conclusion of the defence of his ministry that began way back in chapter 2.

This is vintage Paul as piles up these descriptions of his ministry in a dramatic swelling crescendo. It's some list isn't it? Here is faithfulness, here is authenticity. Here is integrity. Here is what God is calling us to.

There's much we could say about this list, but most helpful I think is to hear three probing questions that flow out these verses:

And the first is, **what are you willing to endure?**

That's the scary part about the "what would happen?" hypothetical. We could *suffer* for freely speaking about Jesus.

We read in verse 4:

*Rather, as servants of 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.*

Both through his own single-minded commitment to tell people about Jesus, and through the persecution of others, Paul *suffers* as he proclaims the message of Jesus. More accurately, he *endures*.

Now the chances are we won't be beaten or imprisoned for our faith. But we might be called to endure the disinterested apathy of family or friends, or the sneering condescension of a colleague or neighbour.

We might face outright rejection, or mockery. We might miss out on a promotion, we could lose a relationship. We might sacrifice our possessions, or some level of comfort and security for the sake of the gospel.

Chances are, if we open our mouths and hearts in the name of Jesus we too will face troubles, hardships, and distresses. Great endurance through difficulty is one of the hallmarks of God's servants.

And that term – *servant* – is loaded up with significance.

Just at the beginning of chapter 6, we're told that NOW is the time of God's favour and the day of salvation. Paul is quoting there from one of the "servant songs" in the Prophet Isaiah. They are these beautiful prophecies of a faithful servant from God who will endure great suffering to bring salvation to the people of God.

And we see all these songs wonderfully fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. By *his* suffering he ushers in the day of favour and salvation. And all who trust him are now called God's servants too.

On the night before his suffering and death, Jesus met with his disciples in a small room. At one point in the meal he got up, put on the robe of a slave and stooped down in great humility to wash the filthy feet of his followers.

And when he had resumed his place at the table he told them:

***"I have set you an example** that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."*

Our passage today simply echoes the call of Jesus. Will you take up the robe of a servant and, with humility, love those around you in word and deed, whatever the cost. What are you willing to endure?

But now we're back at that question aren't we? "Who is possibly equal to such a task?" Which leads us to our second probing question: **what will you depend on?**

For the simple truth is that *none of us* have what it takes to pursue this sort of great endurance. Paul himself says in 2 Corinthians 3 that he is not *competent in himself to claim anything*. But he goes on, *our competence comes from God*.

Only God has the resources to complete such a task. And in his kindness he freely offers his great strength to us, so that we might be able to serve him.

So the question is, will you depend on your own meagre resources, or on this abundant supply given from God? To put it another way, will we commit to using gospel-shaped means and methods as we tell other people about Jesus. Look again at verse 6:

*[As God's servants we commend ourselves in every way] ... in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God.*

Depending on God, we won't be pushy, but patient. We will seek to understand before we speak. We won't try and win arguments but we'll try to be kind. Our love won't be skin deep, but sincere.

Our confidence won't be in PR, but in prayer. We won't put our trust in special tricks or techniques, but in the Spirit's power and the simple truth of the gospel.

These are the *weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left*. And again our passage simply echoes the words of Jesus.

In Matthew 10, from verse 16:

***I am sending you out like sheep among wolves ...***

That's a pretty honest assessment of the challenges ahead! But he continues:

*But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time **you will be given what to say**, for it will not be you speaking, but **the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.***

Jesus promises us to give us everything we need, even his very Spirit in us, working through our open mouths and hearts. So what do you depend on?

And then finally, **what do you desire?**

Now we get right to the heart of the matter. Listen again from verse 7, as Paul builds up a series of contrasts, one after the other:

*...with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; 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.*

Again and again we've seen these contrasts in this letter. This contrast between apparent defeat, and actual victory. On the outside, Paul and his friends look weak and insignificant. Yet in reality they possess the very strength and power of God.

From many in the world around him, Paul is dishonoured and dismissed, he is unknown and ignored, he looks poor and powerless. But from God he receives glory and honour, he is known and approved by the risen King Jesus, and not only does he possess all the riches of the gospel, but he has the great privilege of sharing this great abundance with others, bringing many to share in the inheritance of the kingdom of God. And this pushes us to consider the question:

What do we really desire?

Do we desire the commendation of people, or of God?

Do we desire hearing the praise of the world, or of Jesus himself?

Do we desire a growing pile of earthly treasure, or are our hearts captured by eternal inheritance we have received in the gospel?

In reality, we will only endure hardships if we believe there is something greater than our present comfort and security.

We will only depend on God and his gifts, if we trust that he is *better* than anything else this world has to offer.

It's only when we know and love the security we have in Christ, that we will be freed up to open our mouths and open our hearts wide to the world.

One writer says,

*"We don't have to strive to Get God to love us; rather, because God loves us unconditionally, we're free to take risks and launch out into the deep. We're released to aspire to use our gifts in gratitude, caught up in God's mission for the sake of the world."*

See, as we hear about this exciting but daunting task of being Christ's ambassadors in the world, and especially as we consider the cost of that calling. I think deep down we find ourselves thinking, "What's in it for me."

As is often the case, we find the apostle Peter blurting out the questions we're too polite to ask out loud. In Mark 10, Peter exclaims to Jesus:

"We've left everything to follow you!"

It's a nervous question wrapped up in a bold statement. What about us, Jesus? What about all the sacrifices we have made to you?

And in his great patience, Jesus doesn't tell Peter to suck it up and get on with it – no he assures him that there is *everything in it for him*.

Here again our passage echoes the glorious promise Jesus. What's in it for us we ask? *everything*. To be an ambassador of Christ, to be caught up in his mission to the world whatever the cost, really is the best job in the world.

*"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."*