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## Proper 7 • 2 Corinthians 6:1–13 • June 21, 2015 Servants of God as a Study in Contrasts

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**Proper 7 • 2 Corinthians 6:1–13 • June 21, 2015****Servants of God as a Study in Contrasts**

This text follows on the heels of the well-known “glorious exchange” passage at the end of chapter 5, “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” Our text begins by telling us that we will be working with him—the one whom God made sin, even though he knew no sin. Just like our Savior, our text is a study in contradictions and contrasts: the one who knew no sin is made sin; the immortal one dies for us because he identifies with us and our sin; the king takes the role of a servant so that his servants can be kings. All of this happened at “the acceptable time,” the right time, the time most favorable to accomplish our salvation.

In everything that happens to us, Paul says, we are called to commend ourselves as servants of God. As his servants we can expect, on the one hand, to need endurance as we experience what it means to be a servant of God in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger. Despite the fact that most of us have probably not had all of these experiences, both pastors and laypeople can identify with any number of these when we take our calling as servants of God seriously. It would be good to unpack a few of these that your people have likely experienced rather than glossing over the list. Everybody has had afflictions, hardships, and distresses at one time or another. But have they had them in service to the gospel? Beatings and imprisonments—perhaps not as much, unless one takes a more allegorical approach to those terms, which I would not recommend. Then again, as the culture wars heat up and Christianity becomes more and more marginalized in our society, these could become the reality here in the United States that they already are in many parts of the world where Christians are dying for their faith. Work and sleeplessness are definitely twenty-first-century maladies, but again we need to remember that Paul is talking about all of these in service to the gospel. When was the last time you lost sleep over kingdom work?

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On the other hand, we are also to commend ourselves as servants of God in a list Paul gives us that is reminiscent of the Galatians 5 “fruits of the Spirit”: in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love (etymologically love that is “not hypocritical”), in the word of truth, in the power of God (speak of these, too). In all these things we commend ourselves as servants—all things that Paul himself experienced. He was a living sermon illustration of what it means to serve God in a hypertolerant world that considers God irrelevant and his servants, at best, a nuisance and at worse, non-conformists.

The two lists are a study in contrasts. The first list brings out the difficulties of the Christian’s calling; the second list provides the means to carry out that calling, with the Holy Spirit at the center structurally and theologically. None of this is possible for us without him. Beginning with the second half of verse 7, we begin with a new list as *in* gives way to *through* and then *as*. (1) We are servants *in* our struggles as well as *in* the spiritual gifts we are given. (2) We are servants *through* the tools of righteousness we are given and also *through* our experiences whether glorious or dishonorable, whether slandered or praised. (3) We are servants of God when we are regarded *as* all those things which Paul lists in verses 8a–10—a study in contrasts, contradictions, and paradoxes if there ever was one. Any number of these could be examined further as well.

But in all of this we commend ourselves, along with Paul, as servants of God. The servant, of course, experienced all these as well, for us, at the right time, for our salvation when he became sin for us. The one who was himself a study in contrasts, contradictions, and paradoxes asks no less of his servants and gives no less than his Spirit to make it happen.

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