

Sermon Draft

Text: 2 Corinthians 6:1–13

Sermon: “The Grace of God”

The church plant had gotten off to a rocky start. Divisions over leadership and cliques had caused some issues. A sex scandal of one particular member was really challenging. There was disorder with worship and confusion about the most fundamental beliefs, including the resurrection of Jesus. A painful visit from the pastor missionary who planted the church, followed up quickly by an even more painful letter from that missionary, had this church in significant pain and suffering. They were hanging on by a thread, it seemed, when another letter arrived from the missionary. This letter, though, brought the comfort and good news they needed as it began, ***“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction”*** (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

We know this letter as 2 Corinthians, and the pastor and missionary who wrote it was none other than the apostle Paul. The Church in Corinth had been through a lot when they received this letter from Paul.

There had been significant conflict between Paul and this church he had planted.

All heart diseases are not preventable, but we do dig our own graves with some of the things we do or fail to do. Ah, the drippy, juicy quarter pounder with cheese (that requires extra napkins), chased down with fries. The big tub of theater popcorn soaked in tropical oils masquerading as butter. The afternoon on the couch when the sun is beckoning us to go for a walk. The problem, of course, is building up body fat and the cholesterol that clogs our hearts and arteries. The result is that blood that needs to get through carrying oxygen and nutrients to the cells all over our larger-than-should-be bodies can't get through.

Paul observed that the Corinthians were clogging their hearts spiritually. Their hearts were not open to receive Paul's love, the love of God he was declaring to them, and he pleads that they would open their hearts wide (2 Cor 6:11).

That would mean repenting of the sins of which he'd warned them, receiving his hard words not with resentment but as the crucial wake-up call he'd meant them to be, and then believing that those sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ Jesus. That would restore the loving relationship Paul desired to have with them, and it would receive the essential nutrients God is always supplying for our eternal health.

In the text for today from 2 Corinthians 6, Paul is pleading with the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain. Paul wants God's grace to come to full fruitfulness for the Corinthians. He wants each and every one of them to believe in the good news that Jesus died for them, Jesus rose from the dead for them, Jesus reconciled them with God the Father, and now Jesus had given them the ministry of reconciliation. A refusal on the part of the Corinthians to be reconciled with God, with Paul, with anyone was a real danger.

Paul notes that one of the problems the Corinthians have is that their hearts have been restricted, confined, closed off. The Corinthians have a form of spiritual heart disease. Their hearts are not healthy. Their hearts are blocked by a stubbornness that is putting them at risk. Paul pleads with them just before our text begins to ***“be reconciled to God”*** (5:20), and Paul likewise pleads with them just after our text ends, saying, ***“Make room in your hearts for us”*** (7:2).

The Church today can still relate to the problem the Corinthians had. Like when we close our heart off to others. Have you ever suffered from a similar form of spiritual heart disease? Or as we drive past that homeless person and casually roll up our window and look away. Or as we conveniently forget to do some household chore or something else, we were supposed to do. We may notice this problem of spiritual heart disease any time we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Of course, there are many other reasons our hearts might be damaged. Some of those are things that happen to us. We may have been hurt by somebody we love, and our ability to trust has been damaged. One of our dearest friends or family members may have died, and we just cannot understand why God would allow such a thing. There may be a conflict between us and another person in the church that you have silently endured for far too long.

Whatever the case may be, whatever affliction and suffering have happened in our lives, each and every one of us, myself included, does not have a perfect heart. Much like the Corinthians, our hearts are restricted. They are not as open as they should be toward God and toward our neighbors.

The Corinthians were not left to deal with their spiritual heart disease on their own, and neither are we. The Corinthians were not left waiting for a day when they would have access to grace, help, and salvation, but rather, Paul reminds them of God's promise in Isaiah 49:

“In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Paul continues proclaiming to the Corinthians this good news: “Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (v 2).

The Corinthians no longer have to carry around their burdens. They no longer need to carry their sin, their guilt, their shame, or the wrong done to them. The Corinthians’ damaged hearts are made whole in Jesus.

Just as Paul writes in the previous chapter, ***“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”*** (5:17). The Corinthians are new creations. A new heart has been created within them. Salvation, help, and grace are all theirs because of Jesus.

We inherit the same help, grace, and salvation as the Corinthians. We, too, are made new creations because of Jesus. Dear friends in Christ, Jesus opened his arms, his heart, his entire being and came down from the heavens and became a human being. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, opened his arms and took on our sin. Jesus opened up his arms, spread them on the cross, and died for every one of your sins.

Jesus took on our sin, our suffering, our spiritual heart disease and, in exchange, gave us righteousness, forgiveness, and clean hearts.

We are not left to heal ourselves. We are healed of every affliction by our Lord Jesus. Brothers and sisters in Christ, now is the favorable time. Now is the time of salvation when Jesus brings healing.

There is no waiting. There is no hoop to jump through. For on this very day, we will receive Christ's body and blood for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. On this very day, our sins have been absolved by the authority of Jesus himself. On this very day, we have received God's favor by hearing his word of Good News.

Yes, on earth we will still suffer. God's people will still be afflicted by all the things Paul mentions. We will endure hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, dishonor, and slander. We will suffer the discomfort of conflict, the misery of broken relationships, and the agony of grief. We will struggle with imperfect hearts, but this struggle will not last forever. We do not receive the grace of God in vain.

We receive the grace of God in its absolutely unbounded fullness. For just as Jesus is risen from the dead, we, too, will rise from our graves when he returns on the Last Day. When he returns, our hearts will be opened wide, and we will no longer be restricted in any way. When Jesus returns, our spiritual heart disease will be forever cured.

Amen