

Clearing the Obstacles

2 Corinthians 6:1-12

One of the things that I find most hurtful and I'm sure you do is that when I hear things that have been said about me that either just aren't true or based on half-truths. It's funny isn't it that people who criticise others in this kind of way let everybody else know how they think except the one they are criticising.

Specifically in the case of the Corinthian church, false teachers had come into that town and they had lied about Paul in a number of ways. They sought power, money and prominence. They sought the opportunity to take over the church and teach their false doctrine. And so they went after Paul and use lies to undermine him and his teaching in the church. Even though the church knew Paul and understood his teaching, there are always some who will listen to anybody smooth talking and be taken in by them and they turned against Paul and they listened to the lies and half-truths.

I think there was one sense in which Paul wasn't bothered about the nonsense that these people indulged in. He knew what was true and as we shall see in a moment, was clear in his own mind that he had acted with integrity.

The problem was in the Corinthian church is that criticism of Paul had become an unwelcome distraction in the church. People in the church had become troubled as to what was going on. Paul had become the centre of attention and that wasn't what he was about. What was he about. Verses 1 and 2 affirm it:

6:1 In our work together with God, then, we beg you who have received God's grace not to let it be wasted. 2 Hear what God says: "When the time came for me to show you favour, I heard you; when the day arrived for me to save you, I helped you." Listen! This is the hour to receive God's favour; today is the day to be saved!

What Paul was about was what the Corinthian church was about and what the church should be about; to give a message and that message is "*Listen, now is the appointed time, now is the day of salvation!*" Anything that was other than that was a distraction to the work of God. He seems to have been a bit personally exasperated with having to do such an exhaustive defensive letter, but it is a great insight for those of us in this age of how we should deal with those who are critical of the ministry of others. So how do we not become an obstacle to the gospel?

Don't attract criticism

V3 We do not want anyone to find fault with our work, so we try not to put obstacles in anyone's way. I guess that Paul realised that this was easier said than done. The idea from this verse is that we don't put obstacles in anyone's way and by that he means not becoming a distraction because of his words and actions. Here's how an American writer, Doug Goins expresses it: "*Giving no cause for offence in anything,*" literally means *not causing a misstep, not causing someone to stumble, trip, and fall over us because of things we do that are morally and ethically irresponsible. It gives offence when non-Christians look at us and see that kind of example. Paul is concerned that we live our lives so that accusations against our character can never stick, and then our lifestyle of New Covenant ministry cannot be discredited.*

To my mind, it goes further, putting obstacles can be almost anything that distracts from the gospel – church, red herrings, personalities, silly rules, legalism and the like. It's so easy to make the most noble things get in the way of telling people that now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation – and it happens when people see the obstacle and not Christ. The history of the church is littered with ruined ministries and ruined churches because God's people took their eye off the ball and the criticism became more important than the message.

Don't be afraid to demonstrate integrity

The next few verses are an exhaustive description of what Paul had gone through to bring them the message: *4 Instead, in everything we do we show that we are God's servants by patiently enduring troubles, hardships, and difficulties. 5 We have been beaten, jailed, and mobbed; we have been overworked and have gone without sleep or food. 6 By our purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness we have shown ourselves to be God's servants--by the Holy Spirit, by our true love, 7 by our message of truth, and by the power of God. We have righteousness as our weapon, both to attack and to defend ourselves. 8 We are honoured and disgraced; we are insulted and praised. We are treated as liars, yet we speak the truth; 9 as unknown, yet we are known by all; as though we were dead, but, as you see, we live on. Although punished, we are not killed; 10 although saddened, we are always glad; we seem poor, but we make many people rich; we seem to have nothing, yet we really possess everything.*

These things in themselves demonstrated Paul's integrity: he was serious about bringing the message to them, that it was of God and was truth. These three things are a guide to how not be an obstacle and if we are, how to remove that obstacle if we are truly acting with integrity.

◆ **Demonstrate intent**

*troubles, hardships difficulties
beaten, jailed, mobbed
overworked, gone hungry, sleep deprived*

Paul went through a lot to bring them the message. They knew it. So when was coming telling all sorts of tales. Someone who is intending to wreck and deceive doesn't take as many risks as Paul did. Does anybody seriously risk beatings and death just for a lie? It should have been obvious that he was prepared to risk his life to see them saved. But they had been lured away by the smooth talking Jewish preachers.

What can we learn from this?

Firstly never be lured by smooth-talking preachers, who condemn others. Instead ask yourself the question; what has it cost for that person to have brought that message? A simple truth is that the more desire we have to say "*now is the day of salvation*" the more opposition we meet. The intent of the messenger helps to reveal the truth of their message.

It's a lesson to us too. How serious are we about giving people the message of life? Paul's intent was self-evident – or should have been. Is ours?

◆ **Show spiritual integrity**

*love shown in purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness shows who they belong to
message of truth
power of God*

Paul's integrity was shown in three ways – by his life, by his message and by the power of God. They should have known his message was true because they knew him and they had seen the power of God working through him. These verses are quite a challenge. Paul's love was demonstrated by his personal purity – his holy living. It was evidenced by the patience he had with people. It was evidenced by the kindness he showed – in other words by his love.

It was also evidenced by the lives that were changed as people received the message, but most of all, it was evidenced by the power of God. People often criticise other churches because they don't do things the same way – be that they are charismatic, or they baptise infants, or they are old-fashioned. If you haven't realised it yet, churches are full of imperfect people trying (badly) to do the will of a perfect God. Yet God loves us and works with us despite of who we are. When faced with new things or different things, I usually look at what God is doing. If He's working in power, then I usually find it's because there's a message of truth, brought by people of integrity.

So often we judge things by wrong standards don't we? We judge according to or traditions or our prejudices or by our self-righteousness. And when we do we miss the integrity of people, the truth of the message and the power of God. Critical people always lack the power of God and usually personal integrity too.

◆ **Enlighten ignorance**

*honoured and disgraced;
insulted and praised.
treated as liars, yet speak the truth;
unknown, yet known by all;
as though dead, but live on.
Although punished, we are not killed;
although saddened, we are always glad;
we seem poor, but we make many people rich;
we seem to have nothing, yet we really possess everything.*

I find the most interesting part of this passage is the long list of paradoxes Paul lists. All of them are comments on stories – condemnations – his critics are making about him. Yet each is a distortion of the truth – the opposite is true. A good sign of the enemy is the way in which those who criticise, oppose and gossip usually confuse truth with lies: the opposite of what they say is true.

One of the things one learns about leadership is that one should not jump to conclusions too fast. One of the biggest problems of judgemental is that we make decisions on half the story, particularly if that half of the story sounds convincing or suits us. Take time to discover the truth. If it's a second hand story, always go to the origin.

But worse than that is judging someone who we really don't know or hardly know. Paul's critics had probably never met him. They had already developed their own views about him. So to them he was all the negative things we read. But he was the opposite.

I was looking at an article about the blood of Christ for this morning and I read one on the internet which looked competent but then there was a section that said "*Why John MacArthur is a Heretic*". John MacArthur is a reputable evangelical scholar and the writer condemned him off hand because he did not agree with his views on the blood of Christ – which had been wrongly reported by someone else! John Stott was also condemned. How stupid. Their integrity speaks for them, but being men, they're fallible. I often find it depressing to hear Christians debating with others with whom they disagree. People who are sure they are right can be quick to condemn. But we are not in the business of judging and condemning – Paul wasn't. His message was this: "*Listen, now is the appointed time, now is the day of salvation!*"

It's a good point to remember when speaking with unbelievers. I find it important to not rubbish people's beliefs – even if it is pretty patent rubbish. There's too good reasons for this: firstly, because Christians often have misconceptions of what non-Christians believe which aren't true. Secondly, if you rubbish someone's beliefs, they close the shutters and switch off the lights.

Our task is to help them discover truth. Ask questions, find out what they actually believe, question it, find out their misconceptions of you and correct them but most of all give them the God perspective and contrast what you have experienced of Jesus – show your spiritual integrity – don't be afraid to pray for them and with them. You'll find few obstacles in that approach.

So we don't put obstacles in people's way: *Listen, now is the appointed time, now is the day of salvation!*

*Preached by Mark Reid
07/08/11 MRBC Felixstowe
(c) Mark Reid*