

Our very human pastors (2 Corinthians 6:1-13)

Paul comes to the Corinthians as he is and ministers among them from God's grace dwelling in his distinct and dented life.

by [Brad Roth](#)

June 21, 2024

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

In a tense conversation, someone once dropped what they must have figured was the ultimate smackdown for a pastor. They said, “You’re not warm and fuzzy!”

Ain’t that the truth. I want to be Athanasius when I grow up.

In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul details the struggles and sufferings he’s faced in his ministerial vocation as an apostle. On the one hand, his story is a testimony to the grace of Jesus wending its way through his humanity. Verse 1 sets the tone: Don’t “accept the grace of God in vain.” In other words, let God’s grace sustain you through the hard things (“beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger”) and drive you to live differently (“purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God”).

But Paul also shares a series of seven antitheses: imposters/true, unknown/known, dying/alive, punished/not killed, sorrowful/rejoicing, poor/enriching others, having nothing/possessing everything. The negative sides of these pairs are general realities that any minister of the gospel faces at some point. But in light of what Paul writes elsewhere in the letter, I wonder if they might also be a basket of ultimate

smackdowns that some in the Corinthian church threw at him: *Paul? Why can't that guy be more like the super-apostles? He's just an imposter, unknown to many, who's rotting away in prison—a morose type who is poor and has little to offer. He's not even warm and fuzzy.*

And yet, in the ultimate show of grace's tug upon his life, Paul writes to the Corinthian church, "our heart is wide open to you." He loves them, and he believes it's possible for them to love him in return: "Open wide your hearts also."

The sum of all this is that Paul comes to the Corinthians as he is and ministers among them from God's grace dwelling in his distinct and dented life. He may be just as raggedy as some in the church claim—afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down (4:8-9). Yet Paul brings a treasure, if you don't get hung up on the humble clay jar of his life (4:7). Or his humble physique. The early church fanfiction Acts of Paul and Thecla describes the apostle as being short, unbrowed, bald, bow-legged, and hollowed eyed. But also "full of grace."

It's easy to fixate on our limitations as pastors and leaders in the church, all the ways that we don't measure up to whoever in our congregation—or in our head—is doing the measuring. The wider world has always looked askance at pastors. (What do we do all day, anyway?) But the church does it too. According to one recent study, around 70 percent of Christians feel that pastors are "a reliable source of wisdom." That's a full 30 percent who think not or who—double meh—responded "not sure." Our cultural situation may spin up fresh anxiety, but Paul's back and forth in 2 Corinthians shows us that the current state of things is as old as the church.

As always, the medium is the message. Some kind of maturity comes when we claim God's spacious grace and begin to minister from the unique shape of our history and character—dents and all. Anybody can love a warm and fuzzy, got-it-together super-apostle. But our congregations need a more devious gift: learning to love Jesus in difficult people—maybe even in us.