

A son and his father are walking in the mountains. Suddenly, the boy falls, scrapes his knee and screams, **“AAAhhhhhhhh!!!”**

To the son's surprise, he hears his voice repeating, somewhere in the mountains, **“AAAhhhhhhhh!!!”**

Curious, he yells, **“Who are you?”** He receives the same answer, **“Who are you?”**

Angered at the response, he screams, **“Coward!”** He receives the answer, **“Coward!”**

He looks to his father and asks, **“What's going on?”**

The father smiles and says, **“My son, pay attention.”** And he screams to the mountain, **“I admire you!”** The voice answers, **“I admire you!”**

Again the man screams, **“You are a champion!”** The voice answers, **“You are a champion!”**

The boy is surprised but does not understand.

Then the father explains: “People call this **‘ECHO’**, but really this is life. Life is simply a reflection (an echo) of our words and actions. If you want more love in the world, create more love in your heart. If you want competence in your abilities; work hard and improve your competence. The ECHO response applies to everything, in all aspects of life, maybe none as great as relationships.”

There's truth in that story. But does life give back (echo) everything we have given it? Surely not! And, I'm wondering about the absence of God in this philosophy.

The Apostle wonders about the absence of God in the lives of the Corinthians. Paul and his fellow workers gave the love of God and the gift of salvation to the Corinthians but they're getting nothing back – no echo – no reflection! Paul's asking, "Where's the love? We've had our hardships, beatings, imprisonments, sleepless nights and hunger and you don't listen to us. What gives?"

It seems rather seedy that he has to tell the Corinthians about his difficulties. He's giving his credentials in a way that puts us off. We don't like it when people complain about their problems.

The Corinthians had plenty of problems. Their community is divided; it's distracted and self-preoccupied. It is neither reconciled with God nor with one another. And it's not a big leap to think of our country today: divided socially, economically, and politically. America is divided by the daily violence that erupts everywhere, even in churches, as we witnessed this week's tragedy in Charleston, S.C. We are shocked and disturbed by it.

The major Christian denominations across our country are also divided and distracted by many issues. Church members who desire to serve Christ soon become preoccupied with their own agendas.

In this dividedness, there is a lot at stake – but here’s the Good News - a radical new way of life is being offered today as it was 2000 years ago, in the gospel of Jesus Christ – it’s demanding – needing our total allegiance – even when we are suffering with afflictions – hardships – even when we feel divided and distracted. How do we reconcile our own sufferings with the ever-present gift of God’s grace and salvation?

Will we complain to God? To one another? – Will we not listen to God’s word? – Will we listen but not respond?

The Corinthians are having a tough time reconciling themselves to God. The Apostle writes, “...we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.” Much of their trouble was brought on by their lifestyle. They loved life and lived it up, no matter the consequences... Maybe we fall prey to that way of thinking – well, I’ve never done this before but why not now, what have I to lose at this point? So, we find a reason to toss caution to the wind and do something out of our character. Then, we justify our new irreverent behavior by voicing all the good things we’ve done in our lives. “Yeah, but see, here’s my good side.”

The Apostle says they suffered greatly, but they also acted “in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God.” How could the Apostle and his fellow workers go wrong with that defense of their behaviors? Why wouldn’t the Corinthians listen to them?

But the passage makes us squirm. The Apostle is drawing attention to himself. It seems arrogant. We shy away from people like that. Paul seems self-serving - he’s manipulating the Corinthians to follow the message of Christ’s love, by being reconciled not just to God, but reconciled also to the Apostle. No wonder we squirm! The message is – be reconciled to God – not to me or any other minister.

The Apostle writes, “I speak as to my children.” In our homes we want people to abide by our house rules; what we say goes. “Son, do what I say. As long as you live under my roof you will...” fill in the blank. Or Dad might say to his daughter, “Listen to me sweetie, I love you very much, but you will not go out with that boy!”

When we hear the exhortation, “Open wide your hearts,” are you like me in thinking, “You talking to me? My heart is wide open to God! All the time! Every day!” If that’s the truth for you, then congratulations. Good for you, although I imagine most of us aren’t always walking around with a wide open heart for God

when we're enduring some distress. The Apostle says "Open Wide Your Hearts" even if you're encountering horrible times in your life.

**True joy grows not from the absence of hardship but from knowing God's grace even within that hardship.**

The point of this passage is reconciliation with God. No matter what, the bottom line for the Apostle and for God, who sent Jesus to bring us salvation, is that we openly receive God's grace. We open our hearts to receive God's grace.

But I'm hurting and I'm mad. I don't feel like opening my heart. So, I'll hold back my affection from those I'm mad at and from God. From whom have you withheld your affection? From God or from loved ones? We restrict our love because we're afraid of being hurt again. In our sufferings we feel life being taken from us and we don't want to be vulnerable. We shut down – block friendships.

Sometimes in life we turn away from the people who most love us and care for us. We turn away because they show their love in a way we don't like or understand. I wanted my father to see me excel in sports but in his commitment to his work – to provide for his family – it did not at that time, afford him the opportunity to see me play. I thought he didn't care. At that young age, I didn't recognize his love for me in the way he provided for his family.

Even so, as I matured into a young man I said to myself, I'll be different and do it my way. I grew distant from my father. I realized I wasn't much different

than him. What I had been doing was drawing attention to myself in a career. Does your life draw attention to yourself or to God?

I was successful, from a business point of view but I was a miserable, angry and unhappy young man. I **hadn't** forgotten God, but God was given a back seat in my personal life. The Apostle was an angry young man. He persecuted the earliest Christians. He brought attention to himself and not to God.

I needed to reconcile with both my father and my God. In his life the Apostle also needed to reconcile with God. I could only do that because God had already initiated reconciliation through Jesus. What has been the most difficult reconciliation in your life? The act of reconciliation has been started for us. God will not take away that offer and ever change the terms. The gift is always available.

I believe we can identify with the Apostle's words not to accept God's grace in vain! The Corinthians loved their aberrant lifestyle. The Apostle and his coworkers have given them an alternative to a new way of living and being – of a new creation for each of them – powered through God's grace and righteousness. Paul and his coworkers have opened wide their hearts to the Corinthians – their affections have had no restrictions!!! They have given their all and now they ask the Corinthians to do the same in receiving God's grace. The Corinthians are asked, and you and I are asked, to open wide our hearts!!!

Here's my final thought – the ECHO is our response to God. God is saying, "I love you." WE respond, "I love you." God is saying, "I'll be with you always." Our answer to God, "I'll be with you always." God's grace is ever present and available to each of us, if we'll open wide our hearts and receive it. Amen.