

The background of the cover is a photograph of ancient Greek temple ruins. In the foreground, there are several large, weathered stone columns and a section of the entablature. The columns are made of light-colored stone, possibly marble or limestone, and show signs of age and wear. The sky is a clear, deep blue. In the distance, more ruins and a hint of a landscape can be seen.

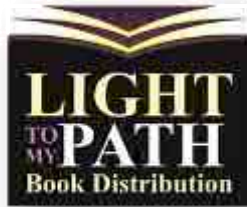
# 2 CORINTHIANS

A Devotional Look at Paul's Second  
Letter to the Corinthians

F. Wayne MacLeod

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*A Devotional Look at Paul's  
Second Letter to the Corinthians*



**F. Wayne MacLeod**

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## **2 Corinthians**

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## PREFACE

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The second epistle of Paul to the Corinthians was a follow-up to his first letter. In this first letter (1 Corinthians) Paul rebuked the Corinthians over a number of serious problems in their church. He exhorted them to deal with these matters so that they would not be a hindrance to the spread of the gospel. Some people misunderstood the harshness of that first letter. In this second letter, Paul tried to bring some reconciliation between himself and those who had misinterpreted his intentions.

Another purpose of Paul in this second letter was to speak to those who were being misled by certain false teachers claiming to be apostles. These individuals were trying to undermine the authority and ministry of Paul. In doing so, they were deceiving the Corinthians.

Paul speaks at length about the ministry of the gospel in this letter. The false apostles in Corinth had been setting a bad example. Paul challenged the Corinthians to be true ambassadors of Christ. He reminded them that they were to reflect the glory of Christ to the world. He challenged them to remember that their earthly bodies were only temporary, and, if they gave their bodies in service for the Lord, there were new, glorified bodies awaiting them in

heaven. He called them to give everything they had to the Lord and to excel in the grace of giving.

Paul does not promise that things would be easy for the Corinthians. In fact, some were already suffering for the cause of the Lord. He wanted to comfort these individuals in their suffering and focus their eyes on the Lord Jesus as their hope.

The book of 2 Corinthians is a service manual for those who want to honour the Lord in ministry. Struggles in personal relationships, misunderstandings among co-workers, false motives, physical sufferings, uncertainties, and worldly temptations are all addressed in this second letter to the Corinthians. All who want to serve the Lord in full or part-time ministry should master the principles of this epistle.

Take the time to read the passage of Scripture referenced at the beginning of each chapter. My intention is not to replace the Scripture but to make it clear. I am fully aware that there is so much more in 2 Corinthians that I have not covered. No one person could ever fully comment on all the truths and their applications found in this wonderful epistle. I can only hope to cover the surface. This is why each reader must seek the leading of the Holy Spirit in the application of the truths this book presents. My prayer is that the principles I touch on will be used by the Spirit of God in your life. This book is merely a tool in the hands of God to lead you into the Scripture and the application of the Scripture to your individual situation. May God be pleased to bless it as such in your life.

F. Wayne MacLeod

# INTRODUCTION

## TO 2 CORINTHIANS

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### *Author:*

The author of 2 Corinthians is the apostle Paul, along with Timothy (2 Corinthians 1:1). While it is quite clear from the context that Paul wrote the letter, Timothy was fully aware of the contents and was in full agreement with what Paul wrote.

### *Background:*

We have the record in 1 Corinthians of a letter sent to the Corinthian church speaking openly and firmly about the immorality, division and abuses that were taking place in the church. In 2 Corinthians 7:8 Paul speaks of a letter that had caused the believers in Corinth sorrow. Many believe that the letter Paul is referring to here is 1 Corinthians. From this we understand that the believers did not receive Paul's letter very well. In fact in 2 Corinthians 12:21 and 13:2 Paul recognized that many had refused to repent of the sins he had addressed in the first letter.



It appears that Paul had visited the church in Corinth but that visit had not been a good one. In 2 Corinthians 2:1 Paul told the Corinthians that he had not come to see them because he did not want to make another “painful visit.” The reason for the “painfulness” of the visit is, in part, addressed in this letter. We have already mentioned that some had refused to repent of the sins Paul had addressed in his letter (2 Corinthians 12:21; 13:2). There were also people in the church who questioned his authority as an apostle. These individuals claimed that his letters were “weighty and forceful” but he was unimpressive as a speaker in person (2 Corinthians 10:10). Others saw him as inferior to the other apostles (2 Corinthians 11:7-9). Still others felt he was treating the church of Corinth as inferior to other churches (2 Corinthians 12:13).

In this letter Paul spends a considerable amount of time defending his apostleship and calling. He reminds them that God had called him to be an apostle and that they were proof of his apostleship in that many had been converted and trained under his ministry. He encouraged the church to move forward in a godly lifestyle and particularly to learn how to give of their wealth to those who did not have what they had.

### *The Importance of the Book for Today:*

There are not many believers who have never had a problem with another believer in the church. It is encouraging to see that we are not alone. Paul’s ministry had been called into question. There were people in Corinth who did not like him, his ministry style or his personality. Paul gives us a wonderful example of how to deal with the problems we have with other believers in the body of Christ.

There are times when we need to speak out, and there are other times when we need to put a distance between us for the good of the body as a whole. Throughout the whole process, however, Paul remains concerned for the church and for those who opposed him. His heart broke for them and for their strained relationship. He continued, however, to seek reconciliation and the good of those who opposed him and his ministry. The book is helpful to all who are facing problems in relationships in the body of Christ.

2 Corinthians is also a reminder of how easy it is for us to ignore sin in our midst. Throughout this book, the apostle challenges the Corinthians not to take sin lightly but to deal with it quickly lest it hinder the work of the kingdom.

In this letter Paul reveals the true source of strength for the believer. His boast is not in himself and his personal strengths but in the work of the Lord God in his life. He shows us how the Lord is willing to use the simplest believer who will place their confidence in Him.

Paul reveals in 2 Corinthians the nature of true spiritual ministry. It is not a ministry wrapped up in worldly power and riches but one that is exercised in humility and selflessness. How often we need to be reminded of this in our day.

# 1

## OUR COMFORT IN SUFFERING

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Read 2 Corinthians 1:1–11

There is no question about the author of the epistle of 2 Corinthians. Paul clearly identified himself in verse 1. Notice that he introduced himself as an apostle of Christ by the will of God. He had a clear sense of his call and office in the body of Christ. Paul was confident in this ministry and gave himself entirely for the glory of God. As an apostle, he carried authority. What he spoke needed to be considered carefully as from the Lord.

Notice that this letter also came from Timothy, who was a brother in the Lord. Together they wrote to the church in Corinth and to the saints that were throughout the region of Achaia, which is known today as Greece. Notice that Paul's expectation that this letter would be circulated among the churches in the region.

Paul greeted believers with the grace and peace of God the Father and the Lord Jesus. Grace is the unmerited favour of God. Paul's desire was that these believers experience this undeserved kindness in their lives. In light of the struggle in their midst this was not an empty blessing. These believers certainly needed the undeserved favour of God. Paul also desired that they experience the peace of God. This peace comes through being in a right relationship with God. It comes from living in communion with Him, knowing His presence and control over every circumstance in life. This was the desire of Paul for his readers.

Paul began in verse 3 by offering praise to God, the Father of the Lord Jesus. Notice in particular that Paul praised Him for being a God of compassion and comfort. This does not mean that we will never have to suffer. Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 4 that this compassionate God comforts His children in their troubles. Suffering is a normal part of life. Even the Lord Jesus suffered while He lived on this earth.

While suffering is part of this sin-cursed earth, we have a God who is full of compassion. As a God of mercy, He understands our pain and our feelings. He is able to respond to us with love and kindness, even though we are sinful. He cries and rejoices with us (see John 11:33–36).

God is also, according to Paul, a God of comfort who comes alongside us in our agony. His presence reassures and gives us confidence. Paul tells us that God feels what we are feeling. He delights to reach out to us in our trouble. He may not take our trouble away, but we can be assured of His wonderful presence in our trials. The Lord will strengthen and encourage us throughout all our afflictions.

In verse 4 Paul reminds us that God comforts us in our suffering so that we can, in turn, offer that same comfort to others. In recent years the Lord has given me the privilege of facing a number of trials. Through this time I have gained a new appreciation of what others have had to face. I write and speak with greater compassion and feeling for those who are facing similar issues. I write and speak from experience and not merely from head knowledge. I more easily understand what people are going through because I have been given the privilege of feeling some of that pain also. With the privilege of suffering comes a greater responsibility. God gives us this experience to equip us for a greater ministry of compassion. We who have received the comfort of God are called to offer that same comfort to those who suffer around us. God is teaching you what it means to suffer and experience the comfort of God so that you will be better able to minister to those around you.

Paul reassures us that just as Jesus had to suffer, so we too will suffer for righteousness in this sin-filled world (verse 5). The promise of God is that the greater our suffering for Christ, the greater our comfort will be. God will not abandon us in our suffering. Remember that comfort is not the absence of pain and suffering—it is the strength to face it. The trial may remain, but the comfort of God gives us strength to persevere. We do not need to be defeated by the trials that come our way. God's comfort will give us all we need to be joyous overcomers.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that even the apostles had been distressed in their lives (verse 6). They accepted that distress and realized that it was, in part, for the sake of the Corinthians. Through their sufferings the apostles were being equipped to minister more effectively to the Corinthians and to strengthen them in their trials. God comforted Paul and Timothy in their distresses so that they, in turn,

could offer that same comfort to the believers in Corinth and elsewhere. They could testify to the goodness and strength of God in the midst of pain and trial.

Notice also in verse 6 that comfort produces patience. Patience is the ability to persevere or remain under pressure. When we comfort someone, we are encouraging them as they remain under the pressure they are facing until God has accomplished all He has intends through it. Through this they are strengthened.

We ought not to be too quick to flee from our trials. Instead, we should ask God to give us patience to endure, so that we can learn everything we need to learn from the experience. It is the desire of the Lord God to shape us in our suffering. Like a master potter, He applies pressure on the clay of our lives to shape us into the vessel He wants us to be. It is never easy to be put under this pressure, but it is for our good because it makes us more like Christ. Paul was very confident that as the Corinthians shared in the sufferings of the apostles they would also share in their comfort (verse 7).

In verse 8 Paul reminded the Corinthians how the apostles had suffered for the cause of Christ in the province of Asia. The pressure and stress they had been under in their ministry there was beyond what they were able to humanly endure. They even wondered if they would be able to endure. They feared for their lives. They felt the sentence of death in their hearts and were broken and brought to the end of themselves. Their human strength was gone. Maybe you have been in that place in your life.

Notice what Paul told the Corinthians in verse 9. He understood that God was allowing this sense of despair for a very important reason. He was allowing these things to

happen so that they would learn not to rely on themselves but on God.

In my own personal times of trial, God allowed my health to be attacked. Emotionally, I went through a real time of depression. I was stripped of a large part of my ministry. Close relationships were put to the test. During this time God was breaking my confidence in the flesh. If I was going to get through this ordeal, I was going to have to learn to trust in Him because I had no physical, emotional, or even spiritual strength left. This is what Paul was telling the Corinthians here. He was telling them that in Asia he had been brought to this point in his life so that he would learn to trust in God who could even raise the dead (see verse 9).

Later Paul could look back on this time and testify to the grace of God in delivering him from extreme suffering and death. He wrote to the Corinthians to tell them that God had been faithful by strengthening him and his co-workers during this trial and finally delivering them from it. As a result, he had a renewed confidence in God's power to deliver. He had experienced the faithfulness of God in an extreme circumstance. This gave Paul greater confidence to face what would come in the future. It was also a wonderful testimony for the believers in Corinth. God would also enable them to face their own trials and sufferings with greater trust in a faithful God.

Paul asked the believers in Corinth to pray for him as he and his co-workers continued to face the sufferings and trials of ministry. He anticipated that further trials would come. He did not expect that things would be easy in his ministry. He told the Corinthians in verse 11 that, as they prayed for him, many people would give thanks to God for answering their prayers. The apostle did not ask that he

would be set free from trials—that would never happen in this life. What he was asking, however, was for the strength and favour of God in that suffering so that the people he met would see the compassion and comfort of God in him and be blessed.

Paul tells us in these verses that God uses trials in the lives of believers to reveal more of His comfort so that His children might mature in patience and hope and be able to comfort others who are suffering. May we experience the comfort of God in our suffering so that we may bring that comfort to brothers and sisters in need of it today.

For Consideration:

- Is it likely that we will be free from suffering in this life?
- What does God want to accomplish in us through the trials of this life?
- What is comfort? Does comfort mean the absence of trials?
- Have you ever had to face serious trials in your life? What did God accomplish in you through those trials?
- How can you use your experience of God's comfort to bless others today?

For Prayer:



- Thank the Lord for the ways He promises to comfort you in your times of trouble.
- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the things He wants to teach you through your suffering and trials.
- Do you have a friend or loved one going through a time of deep trial? Ask the Lord to minister to this person particularly at this time.
- Are there people that God wants you to comfort? Ask the Lord to guide you in this matter.

## 2

# CHANGED PLANS

---

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12–24

Those of us who have been in ministry for some time know that the Lord has a way of moving us from one ministry to another. He does not always keep us in one place. Sometimes God seems to take away our desire for a particular ministry. Sometimes, due to failing health or other circumstances, we are no longer able to continue with the ministry. God might lead us to another church or town. Ultimately, we are not in control of the circumstances that determine our destiny. All we can do is take each day as the Lord gives it to us. He alone knows the plans He has for us. Here in this section of Scripture, we see that even the great apostle Paul had to change his plans in order to walk in obedience to the Lord.

Paul began this section by reminding the Corinthians that, as a servant of God, he had conducted himself in the world and in his dealings with them in holiness and sincerity. Why should Paul have to mention this in his letter? Obviously, there had been some doubts about him and his ministry. Paul was defending his actions against false accusations. Later in this section, we will see that Paul had

planned to visit the Corinthians, but those plans had been changed. It is possible that some were criticizing Paul for this.

Paul felt compelled in verse 12 to remind the Corinthians that he had not been making his plans with worldly wisdom but by God's grace. This immediately brings up a question. If Paul told the Corinthians that he was planning to visit them and he never did because circumstances hindered him, was he acting according to the leading of the Lord when he spoke these plans, or was he being led by human wisdom?

Have you ever felt that you were being led of the Lord into a particular ministry and then watched that ministry fail? I had the privilege of watching the Lord lead me in this way over an eight-year period. I watched Him open up door after door, and I also watched each of those doors slam shut in my face. A friend of mine recently asked me if I needed to go through that trial. I thought about it and felt that it was indeed the will of God for me at that time in my life. The lessons I learned were tremendous. I was being stripped of so many strongholds that held me back. God was refocusing me and redirecting me to the ministry I now have. Sometimes God allows us to "fail" in order to teach us lessons. Just because you did not reach your goal in a certain ministry does not mean that you were not called to that ministry. We are to be faithful, and God controls the results.

There were times when the apostles would be led into a town or city only to be stoned and cast out by the people there (see Acts 7:58; 14:19). Jesus clearly told the disciples that when they went to a city that refused their message, they were to wipe the dust off their feet and move to another town (see Matthew 10:14). Abraham was told to

take his only son and offer him as a sacrifice to the Lord God (see Genesis 22). When he tied him up on the altar, the Lord God told him not to plunge the knife into him and provided a ram instead. What are we to make of all these situations? What we need to see here is that God's ways are very different from ours. Sometimes God leads us into what appears to be total failure to teach us the lessons we need to learn. Sometimes God calls us to sacrifice the ministries He has called us to or to return to Him the blessings He has given to test our faithfulness. Sometimes God will allow us to make plans, and then ask us to sacrifice those plans to Him.

If you have walked with the Lord for any time, you will understand what I am saying here. God will call you to make many sacrifices for His kingdom. Maybe it will be plans you made as you wrestled in prayer with God. You know that those plans were not made in worldly wisdom. They were made for the sake of the kingdom of God and His glory but God is now asking you to give them up.

Moses led the children of Israel for forty years through the wilderness to the Promised Land. He intended to take them into that Promised Land, but one day God appeared to Moses and told him that he was not the man to do this. He was to let Joshua do it in his place (see Deuteronomy 3:26–28). David's love for the Lord was unparalleled in the Old Testament times. His strong desire was to see a temple built for the glory of God. He amassed treasures and put aside his wealth to build a wonderful temple to the glory of God. His heart was for God in this matter. One day God told him that he was not to build that temple but to let his son Solomon do it instead (see 1 Chronicles 22:7–10). Was David acting in worldly wisdom by laying aside his treasures for the sake of a temple? Was David being selfish in seeking to build this temple for God? I believe that

the heart of Moses and the heart of David were right before God. They made their decisions for the glory of God through an earnest seeking of His will.

Paul's desire to come to Corinth was also made for the glory of God and by seeking the heart of God. What each of these individuals needed to understand, however, was that God reserves the right to take these plans and change them. It is never easy to sacrifice what is dear to our hearts. Would you be willing to lay aside the ministries God has given you if He called you to do so? Would you lay aside your plans? Paul was asked by God to lay aside his plan to go to Corinth. He had not made the plan in human wisdom. He had sought God. But he was willing to lay those plans on the altar when God called him to do so.

Paul was confident that the Corinthians understood what he was writing to them (verse 13). There were some, however, who were trying to undermine Paul's ministry. These individuals were trying to find an excuse to destroy his reputation in the region by using this example of Paul's absence from Corinth when he had told them he intended to come. Paul was confident, however, that the Corinthians would understand that God had redirected him. He had confidence that they would continue to boast of him and his co-workers, even as he boasted of them (verse 14).

The boasting here was not sinful. Paul and the Corinthians delighted in each other. Just as a father would be proud of his son or daughter or a husband would rejoice in his wife, so Paul was proud of and rejoiced in the Corinthians. He also believed they were proud of him despite his inability to come to them immediately.

Verse 15 reminds us that Paul had planned to visit the Corinthians twice so that they could receive a double blessing. His intention was to visit them on the way to Macedonia and to come back to see them on his way to Judea (verse 16). In Acts 19 and 20 we read about Paul's trip to Macedonia and the trouble that was stirred up in that region because of his preaching. Paul could have died had he stayed. As a result, his plans had to be changed so that his life could be spared. God directed him to take another route.

Paul told the Corinthians that when he planned this trip, he did not do it lightly (verse 17). He did not make these plans in a worldly manner (that is, without consulting the Lord). We have all met individuals who say one thing and never do what they say. There are individuals who foolishly make plans, knowing that they can never keep those plans; these are individuals we cannot count on. Paul did not want the Corinthians to see him this way. He was not the type of person who said "yes" and "no" in the same breath. On the contrary, he did everything in his power to be faithful to his word. The fact that Paul was writing this letter was an indication of just how seriously he took these matters.

Because Paul had changed his travel plans, some people tried to discredit his ministry and message as untrustworthy. Paul stated in verse 18 that the message he had brought to them was very clear and truthful. The gospel message was not a confusing message, nor is God a confusing God. Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 19 that the Lord Jesus was preached to them very clearly as the one and only "yes" message. All the promises that God made are "yes" promises. That is, they are true and faithful promises. They are sincere promises that people can count on—always.

Notice the connection here between Paul's comments on the truth and reliability of the gospel message and his own inability to come to see them. He wanted his life to be a reflection of the truth of the gospel. This is why it was important for him to be true to his word. When he could not come to the Corinthians as he had promised, he was very concerned that this would not affect what the Corinthians felt about the truth of the message he preached. Our lives reflect the message we preach. If we are unreliable and unfaithful what will this reveal to people about the message we preach?

In verses 21 and 22, Paul reminded the Corinthians that God would keep them in Christ. He set his seal on them and put His Holy Spirit in them as a deposit guaranteeing eternal life. God is faithful and true. His promises will all be fulfilled. There are no obstacles that can stand between God and the accomplishment of His promises as there were between Paul and his desire to come to Corinth.

Paul concluded the chapter by reminding the Corinthians that it was to spare them that he did not return to Corinth. He did not explain fully what he meant by sparing them. The presence of Paul in Corinth at this time may well have caused quite a stir among the unbelieving population. There were those who were seeking Paul's life and creating trouble in the communities where he went. Could it be that this was part of what Paul was telling them? Could it be that at this time, because of the nature of the persecution he received in Macedonia, it would not have been wise to bring that same persecution to the church in Corinth?

In verse 24 Paul reminded the Corinthians that it was not his intention to "lord it over" their faith. To lord it over someone means to be controlling. Paul did not intend to be controlling in his ministry. His desire was to see others mature

and grow in the joy of the Lord. The fact that Paul was compelled to mention this may be a further indication of the opposition in Corinth to his ministry. Were there individuals claiming that Paul was controlling?

Paul wrote this letter to reassure the Corinthians of his devotion to them. He had not been able to come to them as he planned, but his desire was to see them grow in joy and faith so that they would stand firm to the end.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found your plans changing? Has God ever asked you to sacrifice your plans for His glory? Give an example.
- Would you be willing to sacrifice all your plans for the glory of the Lord?
- Have you ever been responsible for not keeping your promises? What is God telling you now about those promises?
- What is the difference between plans made in human wisdom and plans made by truly seeking God?
- If people see God through you, what are they seeing? How can you become a greater witness to the character of God? Be specific.



## For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is always true to His word and that nothing can stop the fulfilment of His promises to us.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to surrender everything to Him.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be a better witness to the world of His character. Ask Him to show you particularly where your character needs to mature.

# 3

## A PAINFUL LETTER

---

Read 2 Corinthians 2:1–11

In the last meditation, we saw how the apostle Paul felt compelled to explain to the church of Corinth why he did not come to visit them as he had planned. He had been forced to leave the region of Macedonia because of persecution. This was one reason for his change of plans. There was another reason as well. It appears that Paul wanted to give the church in Corinth some time to repent of certain sins before he came to visit them. We learn from this chapter that Paul had written them a very painful letter. It is possible that this letter was 1 Corinthians. If this is the case, we can understand what Paul was saying here. In 1 Corinthians Paul spoke very boldly to the church about their lack of love for each other. He challenged them to stop dividing the church by following only their favourite leaders. He condemned them for tolerating a man who was having sexual relations with his father's wife. He accused them of dividing over the use of spiritual gifts. The epistle of 1 Corinthians is a very intense letter. It may be to this letter, or to another letter, that Paul was referring in this chapter.

Paul told the Corinthians that he did not come to see them because he did not want to have a painful visit with them (verse 1). This leads us to believe that the last time Paul was with the Corinthians there had been many difficult issues to work through. Paul had a personality that was not content to leave things alone. He did not hesitate to address things that needed to be corrected. While this was for the benefit of the churches, it could be at times very painful for them. Paul was sympathetic to the pain he caused. He did not want to overwhelm the believers in Corinth. He understood his tendency to want to correct all wrongs. For this reason, Paul chose not to go to Corinth. He did not want to go there and add to their pain by correcting them even more. He determined to give them time to work out their problems by themselves.

There are times when it is better for Christian leaders to say nothing. I tend to have something of Paul's personality. When I see problems, I want to solve them. One thing I have had to learn is to become more tolerant of the weaknesses of others. There have been times when I have actually discouraged brothers and sisters in the Lord by trying too hard to get them to change. Sometimes we simply have to commit matters into the hands of the Lord and trust Him to move in these situations. All too often, we try to do the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul did not overlook what he knew to be wrong in the church of Corinth. He knew, however, that the Holy Spirit would do a much better job than he would. He also understood that his presence could overwhelm the believers. He chose, therefore, to give them some space and time. It was not the right moment to visit them. They needed someone with a more gentle way of ministering. Paul realized that he was not that man, so he chose not to go.

Paul had another reason not to grieve these believers any more than they needed to be grieved. He needed their encouragement and support when he was discouraged (verse 2). It is true that these believers were not perfect. They had a long way to go in their walks with the Lord. At the same time, however, Paul had the humility to recognize that he still needed them and that they had something to contribute to his ministry. Without them, his ministry and spiritual walk would suffer. This shows us that even though we are not spiritually mature, we still have something to contribute to the body of Christ. It also teaches us that we need to be humble enough to recognize our need of even the weakest believer. Every member of the body has a role to play. You may be a great pastor or teacher, but you can still learn from the weakest member of your congregation. Paul had the humility to recognize this.

We were not designed to live and minister by ourselves. Paul understood his need of other believers to pray for him and to encourage him. Even Paul had his moments of discouragement in ministry. In those times God would use fellow believers to lift him up and encourage him in his faith and gifts. If you are feeling this discouragement, you need to find others who can understand you. You need to let them encourage you and bless you. We cannot minister on our own. We need each other.

In verse 3 Paul spoke particularly about a letter he had written the Corinthians. He told them that he wrote this letter so that when he came to see them, he would not be distressed. He wrote so that they would deal with the sins in their assembly. When he came to see them, he wanted to be encouraged by what he saw. The previous letter he wrote to them was very hard. Paul told the Corinthians in verse 4 that it was a very difficult letter for him to write. His heart was in great distress and anguish for them and what

was happening in their church. He had written that letter with tears in his eyes. He had felt he needed to write it, however, because of his love for them. He could not let them continue in their path. He loved them too much not to correct them. Though it had been difficult to write the letter, it was for their benefit.

Paul spoke in verse 5 about an individual who had caused much grief to him and to the church as a whole. We are not given the identity of this individual. In 1 Corinthians 5:1–3, however, we read what Paul wrote about a certain individual in the church in Corinth:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present.

Notice in particular that Paul told the church that they ought to be filled with grief over this man and his sin. Is it possible that this is the individual Paul was speaking about here in verse 5? He reminded the Corinthians that not only did he feel grief over this man's behaviour but over the whole church as well.

Paul reminded the church that the punishment that had been inflicted on this man was sufficient. In 1 Corinthians Paul challenged them to punish the man guilty of sexual immorality. Obviously, they had listened to Paul. Maybe they were being a little too severe on the man. Paul reminded them that now they needed to forgive and comfort

him so that he would not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow (verse 7). Paul challenged the believers in Corinth to reaffirm this man and to reassure him of their love for him, as a church.

It is interesting to note here the connection between how Paul was dealing with the Corinthians and how he wanted them to deal with this brother. Paul chose not to visit Corinth so that he would not be an excessive burden on the Corinthians. He did not want to overwhelm them with exhortations to change and deal with their sin. They could only take so much before they would be completely discouraged in their walk. Paul wanted the Corinthians to find this balance also in their dealing with the man who had grieved them in the church.

Let me underline the importance of what Paul is telling us here. It is important for us to do all we can to maintain holiness in our churches. We must do so, however, realizing that if we are too forceful, we can break the spirit of those we desire to help. In discipline we must always remember love. There are people who have abandoned the church because they were treated with excessive hostility and contempt. Maybe the desire of the church was to see these believers deal with their sin. The fault was not in the desire for holiness but in how the church sought to bring that holiness. We need to discipline our children, but we can be so eager to see them come to Christ and live for him that we can overwhelm and grieve them. It is not always easy to find the balance between punishment and encouragement.

There are those who feel that they have done their duty if they have disciplined a child or a member of their church. Discipline is not the end. The goal is maturity and integration into the body of Christ as a fruit-bearing member. This

is what Paul was telling the believers in Corinth. They had disciplined the member who had grieved them, but they had not finished the task. They next had to receive this man back and encourage him to maturity in Christ.

While this man had seriously grieved Paul, if the church had forgiven him, Paul also forgave him of any wrong he had done (verse 10). Paul reminded the church that they needed to deal with this issue and forgive this man so that Satan would not outwit them (verse 11). It would be easy for Satan to keep the church from forgiving. This unwillingness to forgive would keep them from the blessing of God. While this man had grieved them by his actions, the church could grieve the Lord God by not forgiving him.

Jesus also taught this principle in the gospels. Listen to what he said in Matthew 18:6:

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Satan is a very crafty enemy. He can cause those who truly love the Lord and desire the truth to lose sight of the balance Paul spoke about here. Spiritual maturity is a lifelong process. We will not be perfect in this life. Praise the Lord that He can use us as we are. Praise Him also for those who lovingly inspire us to continue in that walk toward spiritual maturity.

Some time ago I had the opportunity to bring a young man with me to a Bible study I was leading. This young man had come from a very difficult background. He had been trapped in drugs, alcohol, and sexual immorality. God had been working wonderfully in his heart and gave him victory

over the drugs and alcohol. I remember him saying to me one day, "Wayne, the Christians I meet are always after me about smoking cigarettes. They do not realize the victories God has already given me. All they can see is that I am still smoking." As I reflected on this statement in the coming days, I realized that all too often we expect instant perfection. Well-meaning believers were literally discouraging this young man in his walk. They wanted him to get rid of all his bad habits but, in the process, overlooked the great things God had already done.

Maturity is a lifelong process for us all. Believers are not perfect, nor will they be in this life. In our eagerness to see spiritual maturity, let us not discourage our brothers and sisters in Christ. If we are humbly aware of our own weaknesses, we will have more compassion on fellow strugglers.

#### For Consideration:

- Have you ever been discouraged in your faith by someone who was too eager to change you? How do we find the balance between disciplining and encouraging?
- What do we learn here in this passage about the importance of each member in the body of Christ?
- Who do you have around you to encourage and bless you in your time of need?
- Will we reach perfection in this life? How easy is it to look at the imperfections of others and neglect our own?



## For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you discernment to be able to encourage maturity in others without overwhelming or discouraging them.
- Ask the Lord to surround you with believers who will bless and encourage you. Ask Him to let you be someone who blesses and encourages the body.
- Do you know someone who has been hurt by the church? Ask the Lord to open up opportunities to minister and bless those individuals. Ask God to restore them to fellowship with the body.

## 4

# PEDDLERS AND AMBASSADORS

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Read 2 Corinthians 2:12–17

God's ways are very different from ours. It is not always easy to discern the ways of God, but we can be sure that His ways always lead us to triumph and victory. Here in this passage, Paul shared three important insights into his ministry.

### *Calling, Not Need*

In verse 12 Paul told the Corinthians that he had gone to Troas to preach the gospel. When he arrived, he found that a door was wide open for evangelism. Obviously, the people of the region were willing to listen and respond to Paul's message. How wonderful that must have been for Paul. Often people were very critical of what he spoke. Sometimes he was kicked out of a city, stoned or beaten because of what he preached. But in Troas he found a door of opportunity for the gospel.

Paul told the Corinthians in verse 13, however, that while there was a wide-open door of opportunity, he had no peace in his heart about staying there because Titus was not in the city. Obviously, Paul had planned to meet with this brother and could not find him in Troas. This put Paul in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the door was open for him; but, on the other hand, he had no rest in his spirit about being there. His heart was calling him to meet with Titus. Paul decided to follow the leading of the Lord and leave the region of Troas and the ministry opportunity there to seek out his brother.

When I was preparing to go to the island of Mauritius as a missionary, I remember individuals coming to me and saying, "Wayne, why are you going halfway around the world to minister when there are plenty of needs right here in Canada?" I wrestled with this for some time until the Lord showed me that I was not to go somewhere just because there was a need. I was to go because that was where I was being called. There are many needs around us. God, however, has a very special place for each of us. I went to the Island of Mauritius, not because of the need but because God wanted me to go to a ministry He had for me there.

In the book of Acts, we meet Philip who was ministering in the region of Samaria (see Acts 8). God was doing a powerful work in that region, and revival was breaking out. Then one day the Lord spoke to Philip and told him to go to the desert to meet a single Ethiopian. Philip left Samaria to minister to this man traveling through the desert. God had a specific purpose for Philip. God did not want him in Samaria where the revival was; He wanted him in the desert.

This is what is happening in 2 Corinthians 2:12–17. Paul saw the open door for the gospel in Troas, but he did not have the peace of God in his spirit. God was pulling him away from that region. As much as Paul delighted in preaching the gospel where it was being received, he knew that it was more important to listen to the call of God. He left Troas, with all its opportunities, to seek out Titus.

There are individuals today who are ministering in places where the need is tremendous, but they are not where the Lord wants them to be. They are to be admired for their dedication and perseverance, but they need to make a change. They need to go where the Lord is leading them. Some need to change their ministries. Maybe there are pastors who need to go to the mission field. Maybe there are missionaries who need to return home. Maybe there are deacons or elders God is calling to be pastors. Maybe God has a place for you in another job or town. The needs are tremendous where you are, but God is calling you somewhere else. Maybe it is time to listen to the call of God and obey like Paul. He left Troas and went to Macedonia where he was sensing the call of God.

The first ministry principle that Paul maintained was this: Paul refused to let his ministry be based on need and opportunity alone. Paul's ministry was based on the leading of the Lord. He willingly turned his back on ministry opportunities to do what the Lord was calling him to do.

### *Aroma of Christ*

Paul knew that God would lead him in triumph as he stepped out in obedience (verse 14). God's ways were different from his. Paul knew, however, that if he lived in obedience to God's call, he would know God's blessing. God would lead Paul in triumphal procession and spread

through him the fragrance of Christ everywhere he went. Paul saw his ministry as one of spreading the aroma of Christ wherever he travelled.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that they represented the Lord to the world in all they did and said. They were an aroma of Christ in the world. To those who were perishing, they were the smell of death. The presence of Christ in them reminded these individuals of their condemnation. The holy lives of the Corinthians would bring conviction to unbelievers by reminding them that they had been resisting the purposes of the Lord God. The aroma of Christ on the lives of believers condemns and convicts unbelievers; it is the smell of death to them.

To those who belonged to the Lord Jesus, the Corinthians were the aroma of life. The presence of Christ in them was a symbol of forgiveness and acceptance before God. The aroma of Christ on them was a reminder of hope and salvation. As Paul moved from place to place, he carried with him an aroma of Christ. Let's consider this briefly.

As a fragrance of Christ, Paul knew that his ministry and lifestyle were to be all about Christ. There are many people who smell of the flesh, legalism, or religious traditions. Others smell of theology and endless debates. Some smell of denominationalism. As we step into ministry, we can smell of many different things. Paul wanted to be an aroma of Christ. All these other things, as important as they may or may not be, were not to take the place of Christ. What aroma do people smell on you today? Do they smell Christ and all He represents, or have lesser or evil things begun to dilute His fragrance in your life?

*Peddlers and Ambassadors*

There was another principle Paul lived by in his ministry. He went on to remind the Corinthians that he was not a peddler of the Word of God. Paul did not see his ministry as one of trying to convince people to buy a product. He was not a salesman but an ambassador. As an ambassador, he did not cheapen the gospel by comparing it to a product to be bought or sold. Paul represented Christ and spoke authoritatively in His name to the world. The message he spoke could not be debated. It was not a word to be bartered for or purchased at any cost. It was an authoritative word to be listened to and obeyed as the Word of the Almighty King and Lord. To disregard this Word was to perish.

It was for this reason that Paul was so willing to leave the region of Troas when there was such an open door for him. He was willing to leave because he saw himself as an ambassador of Christ. He spoke with the authority of God to the people to whom God called him. Yes, there was a wide-open door in Troas, but God was calling him to Macedonia. As a salesman Paul would have been foolish to leave Troas. There were people willing to buy his product. As an ambassador, however, Paul knew that he needed to follow the leading and call of the master he represented. God was not calling him to Troas.

How we understand our ministry affects how we minister. Paul based his ministry on the call of God and not on opportunities. He saw his role to be one of spreading the aroma of Christ wherever he went. He reminded the Corinthians that they were ambassadors of Christ called not to peddle the gospel but to speak it with authority wherever their Lord would lead them.

## For Consideration:

- What is the difference between a peddler and an ambassador?
- What has God specifically called you to do? Are you where the Lord wants you to be?
- We are called to spread the aroma of Christ wherever we go. What other aroma can we spread?
- What keeps us from being obedient to the specific will of God for our lives? Is it possible that there are Christian workers involved in wonderful ministries who are not where God wants them to be?
- As a representative of Christ, what kind of aroma are you personally spreading?

## For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to clearly show you His specific will and purpose for your ministry.
- Thank the Lord for the privilege we have of being representatives of Christ. Ask Him to help you to be a good representative.

## 5

# THE APOSTLE'S CONFIDENCE

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Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–12

In the last meditation, we saw how Paul reminded the Corinthians that he was an ambassador sent from God, speaking with authority in the world. He had a very high view of his ministry and calling. It is also obvious from the context of 2 Corinthians that not everyone accepted Paul's ministry. The context would indicate that some people thought Paul ministered in worldly wisdom and not by the Spirit.

Paul was conscious of this tension in Corinth. In verse 1 he asked the question: "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" Some people may have felt that Paul was commending himself before the Corinthians to repair damage caused by those who questioned his authority. To deal with this, Paul asked another question in verse 1: "Do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?"



Did Paul need someone to sponsor his ministry to give it some level of respect? Paul reminded the Corinthians that they themselves were his letter of recommendation written on his very own heart and read by everyone. Paul had worked in the region of Corinth, and the Corinthians had seen the result. Many had come to know the Lord through his ministry. He had instructed them in their faith. Their testimony alone was a powerful witness to the authority of Paul and the ministry of the Holy Spirit through him.

This letter of recommendation was not written with ink but by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of the Corinthians who had come to faith in Christ through Paul's ministry. When people looked at these believers, they saw the reality of Christ. They saw the miracle of a changed life. They saw the demonstration of the power of the Spirit of God in them. This was proof of the legitimacy of Paul's ministry.

The important thing for us to remember here is that our lives are like letters. They are being read by those around us. They see the power of God and the presence of His Holy Spirit in our lives. They see the person of Christ and His character in us. Some believers are better letters than others because they reflect more of the character of the Lord Jesus. All of us are letters that people are reading. Their impression of the Lord Jesus will depend, to some extent, on what they read in our lives. How important it is for us to be letters that point people to the Lord Jesus.

Paul was confident that the work God was doing in the lives of the Corinthians would be proof that God was truly in him and working through him. In verse 5 Paul reminded the Corinthians that this confidence he had was not in himself but in God. It was not by his personal efforts that his ministry was so successful, but rather because of the

grace of God. Paul's confidence was in God. It is vital that we understand this point.

Some time ago I was speaking with a dear sister in the Lord who told me that when she taught a Sunday school class, she always made sure that she had spent a couple of hours in preparation for the class. I reminded her, however, that while this was very important, her confidence should never be in her preparation. Our confidence needs to be in the Lord God and His Spirit alone.

I have to admit that there have been times when I have tried to reason people into the kingdom of heaven. There have been times when I have trusted my well-worded arguments and my skill at persuading. Paul tells us that in his ministry his confidence was not in these things but in God. How often has God used the fumbling words of a simple, uneducated man or woman to bring salvation to a sinner or rebuke to those with greater experience? God will accomplish more through the simple man or woman who trusts in Him than through the trained and skilled preacher or teacher who ministers in human strength. Paul's confidence was not in his flesh but in his God.

The ministry God had called Paul to was not a ministry of letter but of Spirit (verse 6). By "letter" Paul seems to have been referring to the law. When we speak of the law, we speak of the effort to please God by living according to His standards. The Scriptures make it clear that none of us, in our own effort, can live the life that God requires. There are still Christian leaders, however, who are preaching this message of legalism and works. They teach that we need to measure up to the standard God requires if we are to be saved from our sin. They preach that we need to obey the laws of God if we want to get to heaven. They have forgotten that salvation has nothing to do with how good we are.

Throughout the Old Testament we see how impossible it was for individuals to live up to the standards of God by their own efforts. None of us can be saved by trying to keep the law. We will always fall short of the standard God has set out for us. This is why the Lord Jesus came—to offer us salvation by grace through faith alone.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that he was not a minister of the law but of the Spirit. While the letter kills, the Spirit gives life (verse 6). What we could never do in the flesh, the Lord Jesus has done for us. The Spirit of God points us to the work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf. Only in what the Lord Jesus did for us is there life. If we want to live the life that God requires, we must do so through the Holy Spirit. That is, we must let Him work in us to accomplish what we cannot accomplish in our own strength. We must learn to live according to His leading and enabling if we are to be what God calls us to be.

Paul's message is that humans are incapable of saving themselves. Only Christ can save. Only by the Holy Spirit can we live the Christian life. Any message that diminishes the need of Christ for salvation and the Holy Spirit for Christian living is a message that is not from God and leads to failure and death.

Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 7 that when the law was given by Moses in the Old Testament, it came with great power and glory. In those days the mountain was filled with smoke and fire. The hand of God wrote the laws on tablets of stone. God brought the law to His people with power and demonstrations of holiness and glory. In those days the Israelites could not even look at the face of Moses because it reflected the glory of the Lord. If the law, which showed people their condemnation before God, came with such power, how much more glorious would be the way of

the Spirit, which brought life? The law condemned, and yet it came with glory. The way of the Spirit brought a right relationship with Christ and was even more wonderfully glorious.

When Moses came down from the mountain, his face shone with the glory of God. The problem, however, was that the glory revealed in the face of Moses was fading. It became dimmer each day. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the glory of the Holy Spirit would last forever. Those who knew the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives would experience the glory of God in growing measure forever. Only these individuals would enter the presence of God and enjoy Him forever. They would live forever with Christ in glory, not because they merited it by their own efforts but because the Spirit of God lived in them through the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus.

Paul was very bold in his ministry because of these truths (verse 12). If he were depending on his own efforts, he would not have been able to have such confidence. Paul was not trusting in his own efforts; however, he was trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit. It was for this reason that Paul could preach with great boldness. He ministered in the power of the Spirit of God. He obeyed the leading and direction of the Lord God who could not fail. He could be very confident that when God led He would also empower.

Paul was also able to minister boldly with great confidence because of the message he preached. He was not preaching the way of the law. No one could follow that way and live. Paul's message was the message of the Spirit. It was a message about the Holy Spirit who wanted to minister through the believer and bring new life. Only this message could bring hope to the believer. Paul was confident in the

ministry of the Spirit through him. He was also confident in the message he preached. He ministered in the Spirit's power and proclaimed the way of the Spirit that brought life.

There were people who were questioning Paul's ministry and authority. Humanly speaking, if Paul were trusting his own efforts and wisdom, he would have had cause to be concerned. Paul's confidence was not in himself. He was ministering in the power of the Spirit of God. His message was not from human wisdom but from God through the Spirit. In this he had great confidence to face the opposition of his enemies. May God give us this same conviction and assurance as we walk in obedience to His leading and in the power of His Spirit.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between the way of the law and the way of the Spirit?
- How can you tell whether you are ministering in the flesh or in the power of the Spirit? How do these ministries differ?
- What do we learn in this passage about the importance of letting the Spirit of God empower and direct us in our service and walk with God?
- What kind of a "letter of recommendation" are you in your lifestyle and words?
- What is your confidence in ministry today? What was Paul's?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life to enable and empower you in ministry.
- Ask God to show you if there are areas of your life where you are trying to serve Him in your own human wisdom and strength.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to trust Him more fully and to follow His leading more clearly. Ask Him to give you a greater boldness to minister like Paul in the Spirit's leading and empowering.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be a better witness to His glory and power.

## 6

### UNVEILED FACES

### REFLECTING GLORY

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Read 2 Corinthians 3:13–18

If there is one thing that the Old Testament teaches us, it is that no one can perfectly keep the law of God. In fact, the purpose of the law is to show us that we are incapable of pleasing God in our human efforts. Every one of us has fallen short of God's standard, if not practically in our lives, then in our hearts and minds.

Here in this passage, Paul spoke to the Corinthians about the difference between the glory of the law and the glory of Christ. He begins by reminding the Corinthians of Moses coming down from the mountain after meeting with the Lord God in Exodus 34:30–35. When he came down from the mountain, his face glowed with the glory of the Lord God. The people of Israel were so afraid of this glory that Moses covered his face with a veil. The life and death of the Lord Jesus, however, reveals more clearly the glory of God than does the Mosaic Law.

In verse 14 Paul told the Corinthians that wherever the old covenant law was preached, a veil is evident. The purpose of the law was still veiled to those who preach it. These Israelites trusted in keeping the law for salvation. God given the law to show what true holiness is and that we all fall short of His perfect standard. No one can earn God's approval through the practice of the law.

Obedience to some of the law (e.g., Do not lie; do not murder) can enable us to put on a good front and impress people with our piety, but it does not change our hearts and minds. It may change our actions but not our attitudes. We may obey the external requirements of the law and still be filled with guilt and shame. Like Adam and Eve, we cover ourselves with the fig leaves of obedience to the law but feel deeply the shame of our nakedness before a holy God. Like Moses, we veil our faces and put on a good front but know deep down inside the shame of fading glory.

"Even to this day," said Paul in verse 15, "when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts." There is no hope in the preaching of the law. The law can tell us what to do, but it cannot give us the power to obey. It can show us where we went wrong, but it cannot make things right. Like a veil, it merely masks our true condition. We can go to church every Sunday. We can read the Bible every morning and pray. We can live a lifestyle that takes Christ as its example. All this is good, but it may only be a mask to hide the real condition of our hearts.

The Lord Jesus came to deal with what is behind the veil. He came to deal with the fading glory and shame we all feel because of sin. He came to bring forgiveness. When we know His forgiveness, we can remove the mask. We



have nothing to hide. His forgiveness covers our shortcomings. His Spirit enables us to live a life that increasingly honours God and reveals His unveiled glory to a lost world.

What a difference the Lord Jesus makes. Paul told the Corinthians in verse 17 that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. The freedom Paul spoke about here is the freedom from guilt, condemnation, shame, enslavement to sin, death, and hell. When the Spirit of the Lord comes to live in our hearts through the work of the Lord Jesus, we are freed from the judgment and condemnation of God. Christ's blood satisfied God's wrath against our sins of the past, present, and future. As believers, we can lift up our heads. We have nothing to hide. The shame of our guilt and faded glory is gone.

Paul concluded in verse 18 by reminding the Corinthians that they could, with unveiled faces, reflect the Lord's glory. Unlike Moses, whose glory was fading, they were being transformed more and more into the likeness of the Lord Jesus. Sin and evil were conquered. The Spirit of God was controlling more and more of their lives and hearts. They were drawing closer to the Lord. This glory was not their glory. It was the glory of the ever-increasing presence of Christ in their hearts and lives. The glory on the face of Moses had been a fading glory, but the glory the Corinthians were experiencing was increasing in their lives. The work of the Lord Jesus made the difference.

For Consideration:

- What difference has the Lord Jesus made in your life?

- What does the Lord Jesus do with our guilt and shame in our lives?
- What do we learn from this passage about the impossibility of pleasing God by means of the law? How is the Law of Moses like a veil? What does it cover?
- What does the Lord Jesus do that the law can never do? How does He bring freedom?
- Are you experiencing an ever-increasing revelation of the glory of Christ in your life? What keeps that glory from being more fully revealed in you?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to open your heart more fully to the work of the Holy Spirit to make you more like Christ.
- Thank the Lord for the wonderful forgiveness He has given and for the fact that in Him you are freed completely from the law of guilt and shame, of sin and death.
- Do you know people who are caught up in trying to please the Lord by their own efforts? Take a moment to pray that they would see that salvation belongs to the Lord and that He is willing to save them just as they are.

# 7

## THE MINISTRY OF THE GOSPEL

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Read 2 Corinthians 4:1–7

In chapter 3 Paul reminded the Corinthians that they were letters of recommendation read by the unbelievers of this world. The unbeliever would see the character and person of the Lord Jesus in them. They were an aroma of Christ everywhere they went. This was an awesome ministry and one that Paul wanted to examine in greater detail in this next section.

Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 1 that they had this wonderful ministry through the mercy of God. Why should we be chosen to represent the Lord God and be the aroma of His character and presence in this world? This is a mystery none of us will ever be able to understand. God did not choose us because we were worthy of this ministry. He did not choose us because we were qualified. He chose us because He loved us and wanted to work through us. He did so to demonstrate His wonderful power through us as weak, frail vessels. It is only because of His great mercy

that we can be used in this way to expand His kingdom on earth.

What is important for us to understand here is that the ministry of the gospel has been given to us by God. For this reason, Paul told the Corinthians that they should never lose heart. It is easy to lose heart in the ministry of the gospel. People will not always accept the message of the cross. Often those who preach the gospel are rejected and criticized. We are in the midst of a spiritual battle. The enemy seeks to destroy us because he hates the Lord and the message we bring to this world. In times like this, we need to realize that the Creator of this world has chosen us to be His instruments. What joy we ought to have in being the servants of Almighty God, specially chosen to be His ambassadors to this world. How this ought to give us courage to persevere. Our desire is to please Him and to honour His name. We minister in authority and under the blessing of Almighty God. We walk in His anointing and under His protection and empowering. Whatever happens, we are God's loved ones, and He will keep and strengthen us. He will not forget His own, so we do not lose heart.

There is a second thing that Paul wants us to know as we share the message of the gospel. Because we are ambassadors of God, we must be careful to renounce secret and shameful ways (verse 2). In particular, Paul challenged the Corinthians not to use deception in their ministry or to distort the Word of God. Let's consider this in more detail.

In our eagerness for advancing the kingdom of God, it is easy for us to want to see great numbers of people come to Christ. Sometimes in our eagerness, we resort to worldly techniques. Sometimes out of fear of being offensive, we may hold back on some truths. We can avoid

preaching on certain sins. If we preach a message of freedom from struggle and a life filled only with prosperity, we are ignoring that the Scriptures are filled with examples of believers who were tortured for the sake of the gospel. Paul challenged the Corinthians not to twist the gospel message in order to attract a crowd. On the contrary, they were to set out the full truth of God plainly.

Paul set himself before the Corinthians as an example of how they were to preach the gospel. His preaching was simple and plain. He did not twist the message to attract a following, and God blessed Paul's ministry in wonderful ways. There were difficulties and struggles in this ministry, but Paul had a clear conscience before God. He had represented the truth accurately. He had not diluted the gospel but preached it clearly and plainly, just as God had given it to him. He challenged all ministers of the gospel to preach the truth in the same way.

Not everyone will understand the clear truth. The gospel is veiled to those who are lost in their sin (verse 3). Satan has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the truth. Unbelievers are blinded to the light of Christ and His glory. They cannot understand what He has done. As we preach the message of the gospel, we will be fighting against Satan. We are asking God to do miracles through us. We are asking Him to open the eyes of those who have been blinded by a great spiritual enemy. We are asking God to give sight to those who have never seen the truth. The reality of the matter is that, were it not for God sending and equipping us in this ministry, expanding the kingdom of God on earth would be an impossible task. We are fruitful only because God is working in us and through us, miraculously giving spiritual eyesight and understanding to those who hear.

To resort to human tactics is to misunderstand the ministry God has called us to. The ministry of preaching the gospel to hardened sinners is a ministry that requires the work of God's Spirit. Only a miraculous work of God's Spirit can change the human heart. For this reason, Paul challenged the Corinthians to stand firm in their dependence on God's Spirit in their preaching of the truth.

In verse 5 Paul gave the Corinthians another principle to keep in mind in the ministry of the gospel. He reminded them that they were not to preach selfishly but to preach Jesus Christ as Lord. It is easy for us to preach for personal motives. Many times have I stood in front of a congregation and wanted them to think highly of me. Sometimes we are so concerned about the size of our church and its reputation in the community that we lose sight of Christ. The ministry of the gospel is not about us. The ministry of the gospel is to focus people on Christ.

If people are looking to you, you need to get out of the way and point them to the Lord Jesus. If people are coming to your church because of the pastor or because of its programs, then you need to do whatever it takes to get their eyes on the Lord again. The ministry of the gospel is not about worship style, or friendly people—it is about Christ. All these other things only serve as vehicles to point others to Him.

People must see Christ. His light must shine in us and through us into this world (verse 6). God has put His light in us. We have the power of God living in our hearts. We are, according to Paul, mere jars of clay, but God has chosen to take up residence in us. He wants to show His power through us. What an honour it is to be the vessel carrying the light and power of God to the world.

Can we say that our lives demonstrate clearly the light and power of God? Paul tells us that this is what God wants our lives to do. He wants people to look at us and see Christ. He wants people to understand that the only way that we are able to live morally and victoriously in trials is because the power of God is in us. We are preaching Him by our actions. We do so by drawing attention away from ourselves and focusing them on Christ.

God has called us to be ministers of the glory of the gospel. Because we are called by God to be His unveiled servants, we minister with courage. We clearly and truthfully present the message He has given us. We don't twist or distort that message to suit our own needs. We don't depreciate the ministry by using human techniques. We present Christ powerfully by the Spirit. We don't want people to praise us or our church. We want them to honour Jesus. To enable us in this ministry, God has filled us with His Holy Spirit. We minister by the infinite and holy power of that Spirit. Our ministry is a spiritual one, and it is victorious because it is empowered and blessed by God.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever lost heart in the ministry that God has called you to do? What encouragement do you find here in this passage?
- How big is the temptation to have people focus on us in ministry? What particular temptation do you face in this regard?

- To what extent is the power of God evident in your life? What are the clear signs that the Spirit of God is in you, working with you and through you?
- Is it possible to depreciate the ministry of the gospel by worldly methods and programs?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the wonderful privilege of being His chosen instrument to minister the gospel.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have focused on yourself and drawn attention to yourself in ministry.
- Ask the Lord to open your heart more and more to the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in your life. Ask Him to enable you to be a powerful witness to the presence of Christ in you.



# 8

## **HARD PRESSED BUT NOT CRUSHED**

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Read 2 Corinthians 4:8–18

There are those who teach that we should never have to suffer in the Christian life. They present a gospel that teaches that when we accept the Lord Jesus, everything will go well for us. The reality of the matter is that very often the opposite is the case. We will often be oppressed and criticized for our faith. Some will have to lay down their lives for the Lord and the gospel. The Christian life is not an easy life. Paul suffered tremendously at the hands of his enemies. He speaks in this passage from experience.

Paul used his own life and ministry as an example of the hardships that often accompany preaching the gospel in a hostile world. He reminded his readers that he and his co-workers had often been hard pressed on every side (verse 8). That is to say, they experienced trials and oppression from different sources. Paul told the Corinthians that this was to be expected. Notice, however, that while they were pressed on every side, they were not crushed. The idea

here is that they were not broken beyond repair. When grapes are pressed in the winepress, they produce wine. Paul was saying that God uses opposition for good purposes.

Paul also told the Corinthians that there were many times when he had been perplexed. We will not always understand what God is doing. We will not always be able to figure out His ways. God's ways are very different from ours. He uses strange means to shape us. There are times when we will not know what God is doing or even how He could possibly accomplish good in our situation. While we will be perplexed at times, Paul reminds us that we have no reason for hopelessness. We can have confidence in the Lord our God. He knows what to do and will guide us. As long as He is our God and we are His children, we have every reason to take courage. He is a sovereign Lord who reigns over all. Nothing can overpower Him. He promises that all will work out for our good (Romans 8:28). We may not understand, but we can trust Him.

Persecution may break out against us (verse 9). Our fellow human beings may not appreciate what we represent. They may lash out against us and seek our harm. Paul had been mistreated but not abandoned. God will always be at our side. He will never leave us. People may strike us down physically, but we will not be spiritually destroyed. We have the promise of Almighty God that He will be our guide and protection. We can live in confidence, knowing that God is for us. He will keep us under His wing and shelter us. The promise here is that even though we are persecuted, we will know His wonderful presence.

Daniel's three friends met the Lord their God in the furnace King Nebuchadnezzar cast them into (see Daniel 3). Daniel knew this presence of God's angel when he was thrown

into the den of lions (see Daniel 6). Stephen was stoned (see Acts 7:58). The apostles were beaten (see Acts 5:40–41). Each of these men faced tremendous problems and difficulties for their faith, and God honoured them in their hour of need. He did not abandon them in their trial. We have this promise from God that He will go with us through every trial we face. This gives us confidence to face whatever the enemy may throw our way.

In verse 10 Paul reminded the Corinthians that the apostles always carried around in their bodies the death of the Lord Jesus. Just as Jesus suffered, so they too suffered for His name. Just as He was rejected, so they, who represented Him in this life, would also be rejected. They were called to live as Jesus lived. They were to die to themselves, just as Jesus died for them. Their flesh was to be crucified on a daily basis. They were to extinguish their fleshly desires so that Christ could be on display in their lives.

Trials are to be expected in this life. Through those trials God is stripping us of the strongholds of the enemy that still remain in our flesh. This is not a pleasant experience, but it is a necessary one. How often we resist what the Lord is doing instead of putting our trust in Him. We may not understand God's ways, but the more we allow Him to crucify the old nature in us, the more the life of Christ will be revealed. Paul tells us here that we always carry the death of Christ in our bodies. In other words, as long as we are living on this earth, we will have to die to ourselves on a consistent and regular basis so that the life of Jesus will be shown to the world.

As we die more and more to our personal ambitions, the righteousness of Christ will become more evident in us (verse 11). This is the only way for us to grow in our walk

with the Lord God. Spiritual growth can only take place by means of the death of our sinful nature. It is our sinful flesh that stands between us and our Lord. Our indwelling sin must be conquered and put to death if we are to draw closer to the Lord Jesus. God is working in us through the trials and struggles of this life to conquer the flesh. How often we want to hang on to what the Lord wants to conquer in us. All too often we resist what God wants to do.

Paul experienced this dying to self in his ministry (verse 12). Repeatedly, he suffered for preaching the gospel. He was stoned and ridiculed, but as he persevered the kingdom of God continued to expand. His extreme sufferings brought life to the Corinthians because through his ministry they had come to the Lord. His suffering was not in vain. The gospel was going forth, and the kingdom of God was being built. All successful ministries come out of the sacrifice of personal ambitions.

In verse 13 Paul quoted from Psalm 116:10. Here Paul reminded the Corinthians that what he was about to tell them he believed fully: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." What was Paul's conviction? He told the Corinthians that if God raised Jesus from the dead, he would also raise them from the dead and present them before the Father's presence (verse 14). They would have to suffer in this life, like Jesus. Some of them would even have to lay down their lives for the sake of the Lord Jesus, but true victory would ultimately be theirs. He who raised the Lord Jesus would also raise them and bring them into His presence. If they bore in their body the death of Christ, they would also share in His resurrection.

Paul died daily to his sin as he faced the sufferings Christ faced. He followed in the steps of his Lord and Saviour. He did so for the benefit of those who would come to Christ

through him. He willingly laid down his life daily so that the grace and forgiveness of Christ could be extended to more and more people and overflow in thanksgiving and praise to the Lord (verse 15).

Where there is no suffering, there is little fruit. If you are not willing to die to yourself, then you will not experience the life and the power of Christ in you. If you are not willing to lay down your life like a seed in the ground and let it die, then you will not see a spiritual harvest. There is a connection between dying to self and the blessing we bring to others. Athletes cannot win unless they are willing to persevere and endure hardship in training. An army will never win the battle unless its soldiers are willing to lay their lives down. We expect great things to happen, but sometimes we are unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices. We want to win the war without fighting the battle. Paul is telling us plainly here that if we are going to follow the Lord Jesus, we will have to walk in His steps. His steps were filled with suffering and trial, but they led to victory.

In verse 16 Paul tells us that, in the Christian life, we may appear to be wasting away outwardly, but inwardly we are being renewed each day. Pain and suffering may abound, but our joy and peace will abound even more. God wants to renew us each day. He wants to pour out His wonderful strength and power in us and through us. We are the fragile vessels, but He is the Almighty Power that fills those vessels.

We have the promise of God that the troubles we experience here below are light and momentary. Paul did not intend to depreciate our earthly suffering. He was simply comparing what we have to suffer on earth to what is in store for us in heaven. Compared to the glory that awaits

us in heaven, the greatest struggle here below is like nothing at all (verse 17). Who among us would not exchange a moment of suffering for an eternity of glory? The harshest and cruellest of torments cannot be compared at all to the glory of eternity in the presence of God. As we look back through the perspective of eternity, we will see that it was all worth the pain and suffering.

For this reason, when we face our trials, we need to keep our eyes on eternity. We need to look past the temporary pain to the glory beyond. We need to look past the insults to the face of the Saviour. We need to look beyond the suffering to the eternal bliss of heaven. What we experience here will only last for a short time. What the Lord offers us in eternity will last forever.

What we see in this passage is that, as believers, we will have to face trials and suffering on this earth. This is a normal part of the Christian life. We bear in our bodies the suffering of Christ. The Lord allows us to suffer so that we can be drawn closer to Him. He allows us to face trials so that self-reliance will be crucified in us and that we will learn to rely on Him. If we want to produce fruit for the kingdom, we will have to be willing to suffer. The promise of God is that He will not abandon us in our suffering. He will go with us through it. We may not understand what He is doing, but we can be sure that victory will be ours. God will prune us and shape us through our trials to become greater instruments for His glory. As we persevere in faith, He will honour our faith and bring blessings beyond anything we could ever imagine.

For Consideration:

- Can we expect to live the Christian life without having to suffer?

- What are the promises of this passage to those who die to themselves and to the flesh?
- What encouragement do you find in this passage as you face your struggles each day?
- What are you struggling with today? How is God using what you are facing to extend His kingdom and bring you closer to Him?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He was willing to suffer for you.
- Ask the Lord to help you to trust Him more in the suffering you are facing today.
- Ask the Lord to give you greater courage to walk by faith regardless of the suffering you may have to endure.
- Ask the Lord to keep you in your suffering. Thank Him for the wonderful promises He has given to all who face the trials of this life as believers.

## 9

# THIS EARTHLY TENT

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Read 2 Corinthians 5:1–10

In the last meditation, Paul spoke to the Corinthians about the struggles he and his co-workers faced in their ministry for the gospel. He stated that they bore in their bodies the death of Christ. This led him to speak about the hope they had in the Lord Jesus. Paul continues here with the theme of life in the midst of death and the glory that follows a life of suffering.

Paul told the Corinthians that if this earthly tent is destroyed, we have a building from God that is an eternal house in heaven, not made with human hands. The tent Paul spoke about here is the human body. When we lose this earthly body, we will have something even better in heaven.

Notice that Paul told the Corinthians that this was something they already had. We will all lose our earthly body, our temporary dwelling. Some will lose it by natural causes. Others will lose it because it is taken suddenly



from them because of their stand for the gospel. The comfort we have as believers, however, is that we already have waiting for us something even greater than this earthly body – a glorious heavenly body that will never get sick or old.

In the meantime, we are living in this temporary tent. We groan with the pain and suffering that is part of this earthly, mortal body (verse 4). We have physical limitations and weaknesses. Deep down in our hearts, we long for the day when we will shed this earthly body and receive that immortal and glorious body.

Some of you who read this commentary have bodies that are wracked with pain. You long for the day when you will be pain free in the presence of your Saviour. There are those who teach that we should never feel pain and suffering in this life. The fact of the matter, however, is that the Bible teaches that we are living in an earthly body that suffers the effects of sin. Sin brought a curse with its sickness and death. The Lord may relieve earthly pain and suffering for a time, but this earthly body will never be fully healed. It will grow old and weak with age. Only in our new and glorious body will we be finally free from all the effects of sin and its curse.

The day is coming when we will be clothed with a heavenly body. If you are a believer, the Spirit of God has come to live in your heart. He comes, however, to live in an imperfect body. We are not yet complete. We groan in these bodies, but we live in the assurance that one day we will surrender this dying earthly body for our new heavenly body. God has put His Holy Spirit in us as a down payment and guarantee of something better to come. The presence of the Holy Spirit is our assurance that God will complete what he has begun in us (verse 5).

The Holy Spirit is the beginning of a wonderful work that God wants to do in us and through us. This work has just begun. We have been saved from the guilt of sin, but we still wrestle with the old nature and the old body. One day the Lord will complete what He began when He put his Spirit in us. He will break the bondage of the sinful flesh. All temptation and desire for sin will be destroyed. He will remove our sin nature and give us a new and glorious body unaffected by sin and the effects of its curse.

Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 6 that as long as they were in earthly bodies, they were away from the Lord. This is not to say that the Lord is not with believers. He promised never to abandon us. His spiritual presence is wonderful and encouraging. One day, however, we will enter the physical presence of the Lord. These earthly bodies cannot enter the physical presence of the Lord God. Only when we shed them will we enter His presence where we will be with Him and enjoy Him forever.

We accept these marvellous promises by faith. We believe that what God has promised He will fulfil. We do not lose courage in this life. Though this earthly body sometimes fails, we live in the certainty of a new and glorious body. How often the enemy would like to discourage us. How often he will try to focus us on this present age. Paul challenged the Corinthians to lift up their eyes to see the promises of God and to live in the reality of those promises. Yes, there was sickness and suffering all around them, and they had to pass through death. Their earthly bodies were growing frail. All of this was temporary, however. God had something glorious in store for them. He had a new and glorious body waiting for them.

In light of these wonderful promises, we need to make it our goal to die to ourselves and live for the Lord Jesus

(verse 9). It will not be easy to continue to live in these earthly bodies, but we have His promises to inspire us. We will not always be in these earthly bodies, but let us make it our greatest desire that as long as we are, we will do all we can to please and honour Him.

The enemy will use the pain and suffering we feel in these bodies to discourage us. He afflicted Job in the Old Testament with tremendous suffering in his body to try to get him to turn away from God. This earthly body is an excellent tool of the enemy to dishearten us. Throughout the history of this world, the enemy has taken advantage of physical pain. He has burned saints at the stake or hung them on crosses in an attempt to get them to deny the Lord Jesus. He has tortured their earthly bodies in an attempt to cause them to blaspheme the name of Christ. He has crippled some and struck others to break their spirit. Some have fallen prey to his schemes. Others, however, have endured and refused to give in. They persevered to the end, even laying down their earthly bodies in death. They knew that if their earthly body was destroyed, God promised them something better—a new and glorious heavenly body. These individuals made it their commitment to honour the Lord Jesus in this earthly body no matter the cost, believing the promise that God had something far better for them.

Paul reminds us that while the cost may be great, the promise is greater. He reminds us that we will one day appear before the judgment seat of the Lord Jesus and receive our reward for our earthly service to Christ. Paul is telling us that we need to set our minds on what is eternally valuable, regardless of the discomfort this may bring to our corrupted earthly bodies. We are not to be afraid of this suffering. Instead, we are to lift up our eyes to the wonders

God has promised beyond this life and, with gratitude in our hearts, fulfil our earthly calling.

We minister in frail bodies, demonstrating to all the power of Christ. Because we have a hope of something greater, we do not cling to this body or overly emphasize its comfort. Our strongest desire is not for this earthly tent but for our more permanent building in heaven. Paul reminded the Corinthians that in this life they would suffer. He challenged them, however, in light of the promises of eternity, to willingly endure affliction and death for the kingdom of God. They were to set their focus on things above and the rewards of eternity as motivation for diligent service here below.

For Consideration:

- What comfort do you find in the fact that God has promised new bodies for us in His presence?
- What effect does sin have on our earthly bodies?
- Does the Word of God promise that we will never have to suffer? What comfort do we have in our suffering?
- Why do you suppose God allows pain and suffering in our lives? What has God accomplished through pain and suffering in your life?
- While God often heals our earthly bodies for His glory, are these bodies ever completely healed? Explain.

## For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He has promised a new body for all who love Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you strength to honour Him in your earthly body. Thank Him that He can use suffering and trials in your life to accomplish His purposes.
- Do you know of someone who is presently suffering? Take a moment to bring this person before the Lord. Ask Him to heal but, more importantly, to bring honour to His name through this suffering.
- Ask the Lord to give you strength to willingly lay down your earthly tent for the sake of His kingdom.

## CHRIST'S AMBASSADORS

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Read 2 Corinthians 5:11–21

Paul reminded the Corinthians in chapter 4 that they had received from God a ministry of setting forth the truth plainly (4:1–2). They were ambassadors of Christ to the world. We saw in the first section of chapter 5 that being an ambassador of Christ would not be easy. We are ambassadors in earthly bodies. We may have to suffer persecution and insults from those who do not appreciate the message we share. Paul challenged the Corinthians, however, to devote themselves to honouring God in their bodies. In this next section, Paul gave the Corinthians guidelines for being ambassadors of the Lord God. He told them the message they were to bring and how they were to share that message.

Notice in verse 11 that the motivation for service was the fear of the Lord. It is because we know the fear of the Lord that we seek to persuade people. We should not understand this fear to mean terror. To fear the Lord is to honour and worship Him for His character and work. In the first part of this chapter, Paul challenged the Corinthians to demonstrate that respect and reverence by being willing to

die for God's kingdom. He reminded the Corinthians here that this honour for the Lord and his work would motivate them to reach out to the lost in order to persuade them of the truth of the gospel of Christ.

Honouring or fearing God is not only done in preaching and teaching, it is also done by living holy lives. Whatever we say and whatever we do reflect on the Lord Jesus and His work. We show the world that we are the children of God by how we live and act. We represent Him as His ambassadors everywhere we go. Paul reminded the Corinthians that he was vigilant in his spiritual responsibilities because he knew he would be rewarded for his good service. His integrity was known by God and by the Corinthians (verse 11).

In verse 12 Paul stated that he and his co-workers were not trying to brag about themselves to the Corinthians, but rather to be such sincere followers and servants of God. Those who try to exalt themselves are seeking their own glory. They want people to notice them. They want others to think highly of them and respect them. Some will even resort to deceit in order to gain the approval of others. Preachers who are trying to commend themselves will use techniques that draw attention to their skill and knowledge.

On the other hand, there are those who seek to bring honour to the God they represent. Children who want their parents to be proud of them will do all they can to honour their parents. A true servant of God behaves in such a way as to bring glory to God in all he or she does. The apostles did not minister so that they could commend themselves and have everyone think highly of them. They served in such a way as to honour God in all they did. They did not want God or the Corinthians to be ashamed of them and their actions.

There were those who criticized the ministry of the apostles. These opponents pointed to the trouble the apostles stirred up in the various cities where they preached the gospel. They pointed to the persecution the apostles endured and to the fact that there were times when the apostles produced very little fruit for their efforts. These enemies used these circumstances to discredit the authority of the apostles. People did the same with Jesus. They accused Him of being a friend of sinners and even of being possessed by Satan (see Matthew 11:19; 12:24). People may look at us in the same way.

Paul tells us that there were people in the region who were judging his ministry by the externals rather than from the heart. They saw all the perceived imperfections in the ministry of the apostles. People did not always appreciate the message these apostles preached because it brought conviction of sin. Many in Corinth did not like the apostles or their methods. Paul reminded the Corinthians that his desire was not to commend himself to these individuals. It really did not matter to him what these individuals thought. His desire was to minister in such a way that God would be proud of him. If that meant being rejected by some, then he was willing to be rejected.

How important it is that we understand what Paul is telling us here. As ambassadors, we are to minister from sincere hearts in such a way that God would be proud of us. Our attention must not be on ourselves and what others think. God is not interested in having servants whose desire is to use their positions to honour themselves. He wants ambassadors who will willingly die to what others think of them so that they can devote their lives to bringing Him honour and glory.



Verse 13 may give us another clue as to what people were thinking about the apostles: "If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you." Could it be that there were individuals in Corinth who believed that Paul and his co-workers were out of their minds? These individuals could not understand why the apostles would willingly risk their lives to preach the gospel.

The world will not understand us or our ministry. There will be times when even members of our own church will not understand us. Why would anyone in their right mind risk everything to reach out with the message of the cross? In verse 14 Paul told the Corinthians what motivated him in ministry. He told them that it was the love of Christ that constrained him. Paul's love for Christ and the love of Christ in him were so powerful that he could not stand by while countless souls went into an eternity of God's wrath. Paul believed that Christ died as a substitute for sinners, taking their place under the wrath of God. He died so that we could become His children and ambassadors. What an honour and privilege this is.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that they ought never to look at people from a worldly, external point of view (verse 16). How often, however, we judge ministries and servants of God by appearances. We think that if they have a large following, they must be right with God. Jesus was discredited as a radical and was rejected by the world of His day. The apostles too were misunderstood and mistreated. The prophets of old were persecuted as fools. They did things and preached things that stretched the limits of people's comfort zones. They were seen as radicals and fools from the world's perspective. But, from God's perspective, these men were spiritual heroes and warriors. They took a stand as true servants who cared nothing about what the

world thought of them. They were constrained and motivated by a deep and profound love for God.

In verse 17 Paul reminded the Corinthians that when they came to Christ, they became a new creation. All who are in Christ have died to the sinful ways of living. We have a new life within us and are called to die to the old ways of the world. The Spirit of God transforms our minds and hearts. He enables us to see things in a new way. No longer do we think like the world. We will be misunderstood and considered fools, because the ways of God are very different from the ways of the world. All this is the result of God's work in those who put their faith in Christ and His work on the cross.

When God sent his Son to die for us, He did so to bring us into a relationship with Him as our heavenly Father. He has also given us the ministry of reconciliation (verse 18). In other words, He has brought us to Himself so that we can lead others to Him. We are ambassadors, representing Christ with the goal of bringing men, women, boys and girls into a deeper knowledge of their Creator and Saviour.

God called us as ambassadors to go with the news that Christ came to restore sinful people to a relationship with God. Christ came to pay the penalty for sin (verse 19). Through the work of Christ and the forgiveness He offers, we can be forgiven from all sin and restored to a right relationship with God the Father. God sends His Holy Spirit to give us new life. The Holy Spirit changes us completely from within. He is God's guarantee of more to come: a guarantee of eternal life in the presence of our Saviour, a new and glorious body in heaven, and all we need to face the trials of life on this sin-cursed earth.

God sent his Son to die so that we could become His servants. He placed His Holy Spirit in us and gave us life and hope. He calls us to be His ambassadors to proclaim a wonderful message of restoration. Paul tells us that we go out in the authority of Christ, as if God were appealing to people through us. We speak with Christ's authoritative message: "Be reconciled to God" (verse 20). It is a word from a perfect and sinless Saviour who took the penalty of our sin on Himself so that we could be forgiven and cleansed. This is a message the world needs to hear. They are trying to reach God on their own through religion and good works. God calls us to preach a message of forgiveness and a right relationship with God that has nothing to do with our own efforts but comes as a gift through faith to all who will receive it.

It is important that we understand that while we all have this ministry, we do not all proclaim this message in the same way. I have the privilege of writing this message in the books God enables me to write. Others have the privilege of publicly proclaiming that message regularly in a church setting or in a Bible class. We need to see, however, that there is much more to being an ambassador than writing, teaching, and preaching the Word. There is a desperate need all across this world for those who will live this message in the workplace. We need to see people who will reach out to their neighbours in practical acts of kindness in Jesus' name. The message needs to be preached in the form of deeds. We can speak all we want, but sometimes the only thing that people understand is kindness done in the name of the Lord. A meal brought to a needy family at the right time is a very practical demonstration of the message of God's love.

Some time ago I wrestled in my heart with not being the evangelist I felt I needed to be. I asked the Lord about this.

I will never forget how the Lord spoke to my heart that day and said: "Wayne, the greatest thing that you can do for the cause of world evangelism is to help Christians be everything they need to be." That is the role God has given me. As ambassadors, we all represent the Lord in different ways. We need to seek the Lord about how He wants us to exercise that ministry and do it with all our heart, not to commend ourselves before people but for the glory of our God and the honour of His name.

#### For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself seeking to commend yourself and have people think highly of you? What challenge does Paul bring to you here?
- What is the motivation behind your service for the Lord? What was Paul's motivation?
- What specific role or ministry has God given you, as an ambassador for Christ?
- Have you been exercising your ministry in such a way that God would be proud of you?
- What does this passage teach us about judging others according to worldly standards? Have you ever been guilty of this?
- To what extent does the love of God motivate you to reach out in Christ's name to others?

#### For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a very clear sense of your role as an ambassador for Him.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to be a servant in whom He would not be ashamed. Ask Him to reveal any areas you need to deal with in your life.
- Thank the Lord for the privilege of being His ambassador and for the way He took all your sin on Himself.
- Thank the Lord for His Holy Spirit, whom He has placed in your heart to enable you to be the ambassador you need to be.

# 11

## FELLOW WORKERS

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Read 2 Corinthians 6:1–10

In chapter 6 Paul spoke to the Corinthians about being servants of God and co-workers together in the kingdom. The apostle reminds them here in this chapter of their responsibilities as fellow workers in the kingdom. As they worked together in the ministry of the kingdom of God, there would be challenges and obligations. Their actions and attitudes would impact the ministries of their brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul has some advice for the Corinthians in this next section of his letter about working together as fellow workers in the kingdom of God.

### *Don't Receive God's Grace in Vain*

In verse 1 Paul began by telling the Corinthians that they should not receive God's grace in vain. To understand what Paul meant, we need to look at verse 2. Here Paul reminded the believers in Corinth how God had heard them and reached out to them, bringing His salvation. They had received a wonderful blessing from God. Their sins were forgiven, and they were adopted into the family

of God. They were recipients of the grace of the Lord Jesus. Paul challenged the Corinthians not to ignore or misuse this grace and blessing from God.

Think for a moment of what the Lord has done for you. Consider that He has forgiven your sin. Consider the hope you have in the Lord Jesus. Consider all your blessings in this life and the next. We who have been so richly blessed have an obligation to God to reach out to others during this day of salvation.

Paul reminds believers of this wonderful salvation by quoting from Isaiah 49:8:

“In the time of my favour I heard you,  
and in the day of salvation I helped you.”

God reached out to us with His favour. He heard our cry for salvation and stretched out His hand. What a privilege it is to know this favour and salvation of God. This is not an offer we can turn away. Now is the time to receive this salvation and favour from the Lord.

There are many who receive from God but don't use what they have received to honour Him. They have received spiritual gifts but have not used these gifts to minister to the lost or to fellow believers. They have been saved from slavery to sin, but they return to their old ways. What use are these blessings if they don't utilize them for the Lord and His kingdom? Paul challenged believers to use the blessings of God for His glory.

In Luke 19:11–27 Jesus told the story of a master who gave to each of his servants a sum of money to manage in his absence. One of those servants chose to bury his

sum and did not use it or multiply it while his master was away. There are many people who do the same. They have been richly blessed by God, but they have not used these gifts for the glory of the Master. When the Lord returns, will He see that you have used what He has given you for His glory? Will He see that you have been faithful with the gifts and talents He has given you, or will you be guilty of receiving the grace of God in vain?

### *Stumbling Blocks*

The second challenge of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians in this chapter was that they be careful not to give offense in anything for the sake of the gospel. Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 3 that any ministry could be discredited because of stumbling blocks. Years of discipleship can be destroyed by an individual who offends others, causing them to sin. People watch our lives. Faithful servants of the Lord should live carefully so as not to discredit their ministries. Many have wandered from the faith because of a poor example from another believer. As fellow workers, we work together for the sake of the kingdom. If, by my poor example, I am discouraging others, I need to repent and change my ways. Paul challenges us to live our lives in such a way that we will never hinder the work God is doing in and through fellow believers. This will require sacrifice on our part the sake of our brother or sister. We need to remember, however, that we are working as a team and that when one member suffers we all suffer.

### *Commend Yourself in Every Way*

Instead of giving offense, Paul and the other apostles lived exemplary lives to commend themselves in every way. This seems contrary to what Paul said earlier:



“We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart” (5:12).

Paul told the Corinthians that he was not trying to commend himself to them in chapter 5, but in chapter 6 he told them that he was commending himself in every way. We need to see the difference here. There are those who commend themselves with selfish motives. Their desire is to minister in such a way that people notice them and think highly of them. They are proud individuals who use the ministry for selfish ambition.

This is not the type of commending that Paul was speaking about here in verse 4. This verse comes in the context of setting a stumbling block in front of others. The commending that Paul spoke about here had to do with living our lives so that people see our example and look to the Lord. Our desire should not be that people would notice us, but rather that they would notice Jesus and His Spirit in us to the glory of God.

We are all to live praiseworthy lives. People are watching us as believers, and we do not want to cause any to turn from the Lord on our account. Paul illustrated what he meant in the next few verses. He used his own experiences and those of his co-workers to prove that they had not received the grace of God in vain. He urged the Corinthians to be examples of endurance during all hardships and distresses (verse 4). The apostles suffered beatings, imprisonment, and riots caused by people resisting their message. It is one thing to be a good witness before others when things are going well. It is quite another to be a witness in difficult times. Paul challenged the Corinthians to

be good examples at all times. What a powerful witness it is to the world to see believers suffer and still praise and live for the Lord. The world needs to see this. They need to see that our faith is able to sustain us through severe crises.

For years I have suffered from depression. I prayed for release but still was aware of this trait in my life. Some years ago I came to understand that this was a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the power of God. The Lord carries me through the times when my emotions are flat and I seem to feel nothing at all. He gives me strength to face the times when I feel overwhelmed. He has given me power to stand in front of His people and preach the truth of His Word when I have felt like I had nothing to give. In all this I see His grace and victory in the ongoing battle with clinical depression. We are not promised lives free from difficulty; in fact, we are promised trouble (see John 16:33). God will allow some of us to face trials in order to use us to demonstrate to the world that His grace is sufficient.

If you are going through a difficulty right now, consider it as an opportunity to be a witness for Christ in a special way. Don't let your situation cause you to dishonour the Lord and set a stumbling block before a brother or sister. See this as an opportunity to point men and women to the Lord's glorious love and power. Our desire is to live such a life that we will be commended for being true servants of God in whatever situation He has put us.

There will be times when in our efforts for the sake of the kingdom, we will suffer sleepless nights. In this ministry we may even go hungry, as did Paul (verse 5). We may have to give up a good-paying job to walk by faith. The ministry of the gospel will not be easy. Those who have ministered

for any time understand the difficulties that come through obedience to the Lord and staying on the narrow path of righteousness. The pressure and stress of ministry can sometimes be overwhelming. In this too, Paul challenged the Corinthians to follow his example. He challenged them by the power of Christ to bear those burdens.

I have to admit that there have been times when ministry has taken joy out of my life. I confess that I have not always demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit as I wanted to under the burden and stress of ministry. Being a witness for the gospel is not just preaching and teaching. Being a witness also has to do with how we live under the stress of ministry. We may preach well but create a stumbling block by the way we handle the stress of people and the burden of ministry. If we are to live lives that are commendable, we will have to face our trials well.

In verse 6 Paul began to name some virtues that God had produced in him through the trials he suffered for the kingdom. He reminded the Corinthians that they had an obligation before God to increase in these virtues in their personal relationships as well, if they were to be the examples God was calling them to be. We will consider these elements of grace separately.

### *Purity*

Paul reminded the Corinthians that, as fellow servants of Christ, they were to live lives of purity. This purity related to their motives toward others. Their intentions were to be sincere and honest. All hypocrisy needed to be banished in their relationships and they were to interact with moral decency and integrity.

### *Understanding*

Paul told the Corinthians that they were also to be understanding of each other. That meant that they needed to listen and not always push their own way. They were to be sympathetic to the needs of those around them and seek to encourage them. They also needed to have knowledge of the Christian faith and be sensitive to God's will.

### *Patience and Kindness*

He told them next to be patient with each other. This meant bearing with each other's differences and supporting each other, even when things are not going smoothly. Kindness has to do with reaching out in acts of compassion and tenderness. Kindness requires action. It is demonstrated by practical deeds and words that build up and encourage.

### *Truthful Speech*

Part of purity in relationships has to do with honesty in speech. Flattery and insincere comments do not build up the body. Relationships that last are based on truth. Relationships grow when we know we can trust what others say. Dishonesty only creates insecurity. Paul told the Corinthians that they were to minister to one another in truthful speech.

### *Weapons of Righteousness*

Paul told the Corinthians in verse 7 that they needed to be a people who ministered in the power of God with weapons of righteousness in both hands. This meant that they needed to fight the enemy with spiritual tools, in the strength of the Holy Spirit and in the power of an obedient life (see Ephesians 6:10–18). They were not to minister in their own strength. God's ways are not our ways. If they

used human wisdom, they were only hindering the work of God and ultimately putting stumbling blocks before others. Paul challenged the Corinthians to minister in the power of God and His righteousness so that they did not cause division in the body of Christ. When each of us does what we feel is right in our own eyes, the body of Christ will be divided. When we put aside our personal agendas and seek the Lord, the result will be unity in the kingdom of God.

We will not always be appreciated or understood in our walk with the Lord. There will be times of glory, but there will also be times of dishonour. There will be good as well as bad. We may be sincere in our intentions, but people may still look at us as imposters (verse 8). They may turn their backs on us and our message (verse 9).

Our lives will be characterized by death. We will have to die to ourselves and the things of this world. We will have to die to relationships and even to our own goals and preferences. Through this, however, we will find life. We may be beaten, but God's hand will be on us; we will be preserved and blessed.

We will have times of deep sorrow, yet, deep in our hearts, the joy of the Lord will well up (verse 10). We may not have anything in this life, but we will be making many people rich with the message of salvation we offer in Jesus' name. Though we may possess little of this world's goods, we have everything of eternal value.

Paul holds nothing back here. By using his own experiences as an example, he showed the Corinthians plainly that the Christian life is not easy. He told them that there would be suffering, trials, and misunderstandings. He called them as fellow workers to make it their goal to not

receive the grace of God in vain. Instead, they were to use all they had been given for the sake of the kingdom of God, as he and the other apostles were already doing. The Corinthians were to make it their focus never to put a stumbling block in front of others. They were to live their lives in such a way that every action and word pointed to the Lord Jesus.

How the enemy loves division in the church. He loves to have us compete against each other and destroy each other's efforts. Paul reminds us, however, that we are fellow workers in the kingdom. By our excellent words, actions, and attitudes we are building up the body of Christ and strengthening each other's work. May God give to us the grace to live in such a way that His kingdom is not hindered but expanded through us.

#### For Consideration:

- What does it mean to receive the grace of God in vain?
- How have you used the resources and gifts God has given you?
- Take a moment to consider your life and ministry. Is there any way that you have been a stumbling block for someone else?
- Have you ever found yourself trusting more in your own wisdom and strength than in the Lord's? How did this hinder the work of the kingdom of God?

- What do we learn here about the importance of our witness in the building up of the kingdom of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you those places in your life that are stumbling blocks for others.
- Ask the Lord to enable you not to receive God's grace in vain. Ask Him to enable you to effectively use all He has given you.
- Thank the Lord for the fact that you do not minister alone. Thank Him for brothers and sisters in your community who are also building up the body of Christ.

## 12

# COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM

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Read 2 Corinthians 6:11–18

Paul began this final section of chapter 6 with an expression of his love for the Corinthians. He reminded them of how he had spoken freely with them and opened his heart to them. He had, over the course of the first 6 chapters, shared with them his suffering and trials in ministry. He challenged them to live boldly by faith. He encouraged them to lay down their lives for the Lord, knowing that there was great blessing in store for them in heaven. He communicated to them not only by words but also by his life and example. Paul lived what he spoke. He suffered much to present the gospel to the Corinthians. Many of those reading his letter had been saved through his ministry.

Verse 12 tells us that while Paul had done everything for the Corinthians, not all of the Corinthians accepted him. Paul had suffered to bring salvation and spiritual growth to them, but many in Corinth were not returning that affection. These individuals were actually withholding love from Paul



(verse 12). Some of these individuals had real problems with the apostle. Paul wrote this letter to clear up some of these misunderstandings.

Paul understood what it was like to love and not be loved in return. The Lord Jesus experienced this too in His ministry. In verse 13 Paul pleaded with the Corinthians to open their hearts to him. Paul called on them to deal with these obstacles to be reconciled with him.

Are there individuals that you have closed your heart to today? Are you willing to take the risk of opening your heart up to them again? Are you willing to renew your affections toward them? One thing is sure—if you are willing, God is able. Trust Him. Listen to Him, and let Him bring the healing that is necessary.

It is interesting in this passage that although the Corinthians had closed their hearts to the apostle Paul, they had opened them to unbelievers. In verse 14 Paul spoke to the Corinthians about being yoked together with unbelievers. Imagine an ox ploughing the ground with a donkey yoked beside it. Because the ox is so much stronger, the donkey would not be able to keep up the pace, and one would be working against the other. The ox would wear the donkey out and possibly even kill it. The work would ultimately suffer because the animals were not matched in strength.

Paul is telling us that this same principle applies to the Christian life. What happens when believers find themselves associating all the time with unbelievers? Does their spiritual walk not suffer for it? What happens when you choose an unbeliever for a husband or wife? Do you not suffer in your spiritual walk because of it? Maybe you have tried to form a business partnership with an unbeliever. How you conduct business as a believer is very different

from the way an unbeliever would conduct business. What happens when we bring the unbeliever into the church to be involved in ministry? Will the church not suffer as a result? It is true that we cannot avoid working side by side with unbelievers in certain circumstances, but Paul reminds us here of the benefits of being in agreement in spiritual matters.

“What do righteousness and wickedness have in common?” asked Paul in verse 14. What kind of fellowship can light have with darkness? The reality of the matter is that one works against the other. In verse 15 Paul reminded the Corinthians that there is really no harmony between Christ and Belial. The Hebrew word *belial* means “worthlessness” or “evil.” The fact that it is capitalized indicates that it is used here as a name for someone in particular. Most commentators agree that “Belial” here is Satan, who is the father of worthlessness and evil. What does Satan have in common with the Lord Jesus Christ? Satan stands against all that Jesus stands for. Satan is the enemy of all that Jesus came to do and say. Paul went a step further and reminded the Corinthians that the children of Satan have nothing in common with the children of God. Imagine asking the enemy to join you in battle during a time of war. If you did, he would use the opportunity to fight against you. As believers, we have a real enemy who is out to destroy us (see 1 Peter 5:8). Satan often uses unbelievers to try to destroy the cause of Christ.

This principle is true in the context of the church as well. What agreement can there be between the temple of God and idols. A quick look at the Word of God will show us clearly that God speaks out very sharply against the worship of idols or any other god (see Exodus 20:3–4; Leviticus 26:1; 1 Samuel 12:21). He takes these matters very seriously. You cannot serve the true God and serve the

false gods of this world at the same time. You need to make up your mind. Who you are going to serve? You cannot serve God by serving another god or bowing down to an idol. Imagine a husband saying that he loves his wife and yet going out and regularly committing adultery. How can we say that we love our spouses if we are not being faithful to them?

Paul reminded the Corinthians that if they had accepted the Lord Jesus as their personal Saviour, their bodies were the temple of God (verse 16). God put His Holy Spirit in them. He promised to walk with them and be their God always. Everywhere they went, they were in His presence.

In light of this wonderful truth, Paul told the Corinthians that they were to come out from among unbelievers and their ways. As temples of God, they were to keep themselves pure and holy (verse 17). As children of God, they needed to conduct themselves as His holy children (verse 18). This meant that there were times when they would have to break relationships with unbelievers. There were places where they needed to stop going. There were evil things they needed to stop being exposed to.

There are many ways we can bring evil into the temple of God. There are many doors into the temple. There are times when we need to close the door of our ears or our eyes. Sometimes we need to close the door to our thoughts and attitudes. Sometimes we need to separate ourselves from friends or loved ones because they are bringing defilement into our temple of the Lord.

The Corinthians had a very practical lesson to learn. They had closed their affections toward Paul and the other apostles but were opening their affections to the enemy. The door of their heart was closed to God but wide open to the

world. Paul spoke sharply to them here. He reminded them of the seriousness of what they were doing and challenged them to separate themselves from unbelievers and their evil ways.

For Consideration:

- In what ways can the believer form a partnership with the unbeliever?
- How are the ways of the unbeliever different from the ways of God?
- What does this section teach us about the need to make a clear separation between the world and Christ?
- Have you found yourself guilty of closing your heart to a brother or sister in Christ? What can you do to open your heart up to them?
- What particular worldly temptations do you struggle with today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you see any area where you need to close a door to the world and its ways.
- Ask God to enable you to keep the temple of your body pure for Him.

- Are there any believers that you have closed your heart to today? Ask the Lord to open your heart to them.

# 13

## A HARD LETTER

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Read 2 Corinthians 7

We have already had hints in this book of a problem between Paul and certain individuals in Corinth. One of Paul's purposes in writing this second letter to the Corinthians was to resolve some of these issues and rebuild the relationship between him and these particular individuals.

In the last chapter, Paul dealt with the fact that the Corinthians were children of God and, as such, needed to separate themselves from the impurities of this world. He reminded these believers that God was pleased to call them His children. He was proud to be their Father. What a wonderful privilege we have to be God's children. What hope we have for the future? As Paul began chapter 7, he reminded the Corinthian believers that since they had these wonderful promises from God, they needed to be a people who are pure and right before Him.

The day is coming when the Lord will come to take us to be with Him forever. What a shame it would be for us not to be ready when He comes for us. Paul challenged the

Corinthians to live in purity. He challenged them to remove anything in their lives that would contaminate their bodies or their souls. They were to live in an increasing holiness out of reverence for God and His purposes. “Perfecting holiness” means growing more and more like Christ each day (verse 1).

Take a moment to examine your life. Are you becoming more and more like the Lord Jesus? Are you having more and more victories over sin and evil in your life? Are you closer to the Lord this year than you were last year?

Part of becoming more and more like Christ and perfecting holiness has to do with personal relationships. In verse 2 Paul appealed to the Corinthians, in their quest for deeper holiness, to give him and his fellow workers their full affection (see 6:11–13). Again we see that there was a strain in the relationship between the Corinthians and Paul, and it was important that they deal with this. The implication of this verse is clear. If you want to grow in holiness, you will have to deal with strained relationships. Perfecting holiness requires being reconciled with others in Christ.

Paul reminds the Corinthians in verse 2 that he had done nothing wrong. He had examined his personal relationship with God and had a clean conscience. In verse 3 he told them that he was quite willing to live or even to die for them. While Paul had done no wrong, the relationship between the Corinthians and him was still strained. Paul felt obligated to reaffirm his love and forgiveness toward the Corinthians in an attempt to break down any differences that existed.

There have been times in my relationships with others that I felt this strain. I have at times examined my heart and felt

no bitterness, anger, or anything negative toward the person who seemed to have trouble with me. My temptation in these times was to think that this was not my problem because I had nothing against that person.

Paul had no problems with the Corinthians. The Corinthians had problems with him, but it was Paul who tried to bring healing in the relationship. He did not leave it to the Corinthians to deal with this. The fact of the matter is that whenever there are broken relationships among believers, the kingdom of God suffers.

Jesus had something to say on this matter in Matthew 5:23–24:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Notice here in particular that Jesus did not say, “If you have something against your brother.” He said, “If your brother has something against you.” You may have no problem with your brother, but he has a problem with you. Jesus asked the worshiper to deal with this broken relationship. This is what Paul was doing here. He was innocent, but he was the one attempting to resolve the problem.

It is true that resolving problems people have with us will not be easy. There are times when we simply cannot resolve our differences. Paul challenges us, however, at least to try.



In verse 4 Paul told the Corinthians that he had great confidence in them. He believed that they would deal with this matter and open their hearts to him. He reminded them of his deep feelings toward them and that he took pride in them. Admittedly, there were still issues that needed to be dealt with. They were not perfect, but still Paul delighted in them and was proud of them. They were a blessing to him. Even in his deep troubles and affliction, these individuals brought joy to his heart. He could be confident of God's ongoing work in their lives (see Philippians 1:6).

When Paul was in Macedonia, he suffered tremendous persecution. In verse 5 he told the Corinthians that his body had no rest. He spent long hours in hard service for the kingdom. He was harassed everywhere he went in this region. There were conflicts and quarrels all around him, and he felt burdened. He admitted that he experienced fear. The conflicts and resistance to the gospel were so strong in this region that Paul did not know if he was going to live or die.

In this time of difficult ministry, God reached out to Paul and gave him Titus as a companion. The great apostle Paul understood that he could not minister alone. He often brought others with him on his missionary journeys because he knew how much he needed their fellowship and encouragement.

For many years of my ministry, I have worked alone. Sometimes ministry can be lonely. I have grown in my appreciation for the need of companions in the Lord's work. How many pastors or Christian workers have felt like giving up? The principle reason for this is that they have been alone in ministry and have not been supported and encouraged by fellow workers who understand and bear the burden with them.

In verse 7 Paul also informed the Corinthians that in his time of distress in Macedonia, not only did God bring comfort to him through Titus but he also found great comfort in the news Titus brought from the church in Corinth. Titus had taken the Corinthians the confrontational letter from Paul, and they had responded properly to it. They had mourned over their sin, repented and had sorrow for adding to Paul's anguish in ministry. When Paul heard this news from Titus, he felt much comfort and relief. What a blessing Paul found in simply knowing that the Corinthians still cared for him and that his words had strengthened them.

Maybe you too have been encouraged by hearing from others. Maybe it was a phone call, visit, or word of comfort that showed you how much someone cared. I have often been blessed by letters received from pastors or Christian workers who have been given copies of my books and wrote to let me know that the books were ministering to them. We never know the power of a simple gesture to encourage and bless another. By demonstrating our love in a simple and practical way, we might be the one to bless and encourage a Christian worker or believer to continue in the Lord's good work.

In verse 8 Paul expressed some of his feelings about the harsh letter he had sent them by Titus. Some believe that this letter was the epistle of 1 Corinthians, in which Paul addressed some very serious problems in the church. He rebuked the Corinthians for allowing a man to remain in fellowship while sleeping with his father's wife. Paul challenged them also about factions that existed among them. He rebuked them for their lack of love and their misuse of spiritual gifts.

This letter caused a stir among the believers as well as much sorrow and grief. As a result, some people turned against Paul, and he wondered if he had been so severe that he had discouraged the assembly. On the other hand, however, he understood that though the letter hurt them, it was necessary to bring correction. He felt it was his obligation to point out the sin in their church.

Imagine a parent not speaking to a child about their bad behaviour. Imagine a parent never disciplining or teaching a child. We do our children tremendous harm if we do not point out their errors. If we love them, we will correct them and teach them what is right. This is how Paul saw what he had done. This stern correction on Paul's part led the Corinthians to repentance. Paul's letter woke them up to the seriousness of what was taking place in their assembly.

There are times as spiritual leaders when God will call us to speak hard words. These words will not always be well received, but they are necessary for the strengthening of the body of Christ. In the end, Paul rejoiced because those hard words brought deeper holiness to the church of Corinth. The church became stronger and had a more vibrant testimony in their community. The wrong was corrected and holiness restored. Their godly sorrow brought repentance and led them into a deeper relationship with their Saviour.

In verse 10 Paul made a comparison between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Godly sorrow leads to repentance and victory with no regret. In other words, godly sorrow opens the heart to embrace correction. Paul's letter had made the Corinthians sad for a while, as God intended. The Corinthians grew in godliness. The believers changed

their minds and behaviour and were set free from several sinful situations.

Worldly sorrow differs from godly sorrow in that it is not focused on God and holiness. It is focused on a person's wounded pride. Worldly sorrow grieves that a reputation is tarnished or that a lust is unfulfilled. It grieves because of a loss of something of temporary value in this world. The focus is not on God and what He wants to accomplish through that loss but on selfish desires and self-pity.

The Corinthians were sorrowful because the heart of God was grieved (verse 11). This sorrow came from the Holy Spirit and led the church to repentance. The result was a deeper earnestness and sincerity in their faith. This sorrow released the church into greater holiness.

Paul's harsh letter showed something else to the Corinthians. It showed them that they were fighting for the same purpose—the glory of God. Paul made it clear Corinthians that he wrote the severe letter in order that they might be one before the Father (verse 12). The letter and the resulting repentance not only restored the church and reassured them that they were one with Paul but it also brought tremendous encouragement to Titus (verse 13). Titus was blessed to see how the church had been so willing to deal with their sin. Titus was refreshed in his spiritual walk through this church when he saw their eagerness to deal with the issues that separated them from Paul and the Lord.

Paul was proud of the Corinthians. He boasted to Titus about them and their desire for the Lord (verse 14). The result was that Titus had a greater love and affection for the church in Corinth. When Titus went to Corinth to minister, the church received him with open arms and a deep

reverence. All these things gave Paul a great confidence in the work of God in this church. Paul's letter to them was harsh, but it brought them into a deeper relationship with God. They became greater instruments for the kingdom of God.

#### For Consideration:

- Have you ever been in a situation where you were confronted by your sin? Was this an easy experience? What was the result of confessing your sin?
- Take a moment to consider if there are broken relationships in your life. What would God have you to do about these relationships?
- What is the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow? Can they be confused at times?
- What are you willing to do to become more like Christ and grow in deeper holiness? What keeps you from becoming more like Christ?

#### For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a heart that seeks His glory and a deeper holiness.
- Ask the Lord to bring healing to any broken relationships in your life.

- Ask the Lord to open your heart to receive the rebuke of a brother or sister and make the changes necessary.
- Thank the Lord for those who have come alongside you in ministry. Ask God if there is anyone He wants you to encourage today.

# 14

## THE GRACE OF GIVING

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Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–9

Not only did the apostle Paul want the Corinthians to be reconciled with each other and deal with the issues that divided them, but he also wanted them to be a generous church. In this chapter Paul emphasized the importance of the ministry of giving.

Paul began in verse 1 by reminding the Corinthians of what he saw and experienced in the region of Macedonia. He told the church in Corinth that God had given the churches in Macedonia a great grace. What is grace? It is the unmerited favour of God toward us. It is His blessing despite who we are. It is His enabling despite our sinfulness and weakness. The churches in the region of Macedonia had received a special favour from God in their lives, and Paul wanted to tell the believers in Corinth.

Paul reported that the churches of Macedonia were going through severe trial and extreme poverty. These churches faced much difficulty and opposition. Notice, however, that

despite this tremendous suffering, the churches were overflowing with joy and rich generosity (verse 2). This was due to the grace of God, who had given them the ability to turn their extreme poverty into wonderful generosity. They overflowed with joy even during severe suffering.

What a blessing it is to meet people like this. They have nothing but difficulty in their lives, but they are filled with joy. They have very little of this world's goods, but they give generously. Many of us under severe persecution and suffering become overwhelmed with sorrow and worry. What a blessing it is to be able to face the inevitable struggles of life with overflowing joy in our hearts. This is a rich gift from God, and this is what God gave to these believers. He gave them an overflowing joy in their hearts in the midst of persecution. The fruit of the Spirit welled up in them and flooded their souls. If only we could all experience this.

Paul told the Corinthians that the Spirit of God so moved in the lives of these poor saints that they gave all they were able to give and even more. No one asked them to contribute, but they gave of their own free will out of a heart overflowing with gratitude to God. Paul saw this as a wonderful gift of grace from God to the Macedonians. These believers did not need Paul to tell them to give; they did so under the direction and leading of the Holy Spirit who was moving them. Notice in verse 4 that they "urgently pleaded" with Paul for this privilege. These Macedonians begged for the privilege of relieving others who suffered as they did.

Without generous individuals such as this, the work of the kingdom could not progress. Individuals who give sacrificially are a vital part of ministry. They enable ministries to continue by supplying practical needs.



In verse 5 Paul told the Corinthians that the believers in Macedonia did not give as he had expected. The Macedonians first gave themselves to the Lord. That is, they offered all they had, themselves and their possessions, to the Lord. They did not consider anything they had to be their own. It was all given to the Lord for His glory. It was out of this commitment that they gave to the ministry of the apostles and the needs of the kingdom in other areas.

It is possible for people to give without first giving themselves and all they have to the Lord. Those who give in this way believe that their possessions belong to them. They feel that they are being generous, kind, and compassionate by giving away some of their own money and resources. They feel that they are doing God a favour by giving to His work. This was not the attitude of the Macedonians. They recognized that all their money and possessions already belonged to Him. When they gave, it was not as if they were doing God a favour but rather simply sending His resources to the places where He wanted to use them. They were mere stewards of God's resources.

The Macedonians give us a powerful example to follow. First, they gave themselves and all they had to the Lord. They surrendered everything. They claimed nothing for themselves. All was God's. They simply channelled these resources as the Lord saw fit to direct them. Isn't this how it ought to be for us? We should not be content with giving God a portion of our resources. We are to give Him everything we have. Nothing should be held back. This, according to Paul, is the will of God for all His children. First, we must give ourselves and all we have to God, and then we must let Him direct us in how we use His resources. All must be surrendered and ready for God to use as He pleases (see Romans 12:1–2).

Paul told the Corinthians in verse 6 that he had urged Titus to encourage this gift of giving in the church of Corinth during his visit. Paul wanted the church in Corinth to be a generous church that followed the example of the churches in Macedonia. Paul recognized that the believers in Corinth had excelled in other areas. They were examples in faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and love. He urged them to complete what was lacking in their faith by excelling in this grace of giving as well. Paul was telling the Corinthians that giving is a vital part of the life of a church. A church that has not excelled in the grace of giving is a church that needs to mature. It is the heart of God that we be a generous people.

In verse 8 Paul made it clear he was not commanding the Corinthians to give. While he could have commanded them to give, it might not be from their hearts. The churches in Macedonia did not need to be told to give. They gave out of their own free will motivated by the love of God and the Spirit within them. Paul did not want to force the Corinthians to give. He wanted them to give freely out of their own hearts.

Notice Paul's philosophy of ministry. He knew that it was possible for him to tell people what to do, but that would be of no benefit in the end. Legalism tells people how they are to act and disciplines them when they do not follow the rules and regulations. Legalism, however, does not change the heart. You can do everything right on the outside but be far from God on the inside. God does not look at the outward action but on the heart. Paul could point the Corinthians in the right direction in this matter of giving, but the Corinthians needed to make this a matter of the heart. Paul did not want them to simply obey some law out of compulsion or because Paul or their church leaders told them to give. They were to give because they wanted to,

because the Lord was moving them to give. How many gifts have lost their eternal significance because they have not been given from the heart but out of guilt and obligation?

In verse 9 Paul pointed the Corinthians to the Lord Jesus and what He had done for them. He reminded them of the grace of the Lord Jesus toward them. He was rich, but He became poor for them. He offered His life on the cross so that they could come to know the Father. He gave His perfect life so that they could know forgiveness of sin. He gave so that they could experience His riches. Paul set Christ before the Corinthians as an example to follow and as a motivation to give just as Jesus had given to them. May Christ's example of loving sacrifice be our motivation as well.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn here about the importance of giving? Why is this ministry so important in the kingdom of God?
- What difference does it make when we first give ourselves to the Lord Jesus before we give to others?
- Take a moment to consider how you give. Do you give out of a sense of obligation and guilt or out of a heart that truly loves the Lord?
- Is there anything that you hesitate to give to the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to offer all you have to the Lord. Thank Him that all you have comes from Him.
- Ask the Lord to show you how He would have you use the resources He has given you. Ask Him to show you where He would have you contribute to the work of His kingdom.
- Thank the Lord Jesus for the way He gave Himself for you.

# 15

## THE ADMINISTRATION OF A GIFT

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Read 2 Corinthians 8:10–24

In the first part of this chapter, Paul spoke to the Corinthians about the wonderful grace of giving. He reminded them how important this ministry is in the kingdom of God. Paul had a burden on his heart to see the church in Corinth excel in this gift of giving. Here in this final section of chapter 8, he gave the Corinthians some advice on how they should give.

### *Give Wilfully with Follow Through*

Paul began by reminding the Corinthians of the importance of willingness in the matter of giving. In verse 10 Paul told them that in the last year, they had been the first to give to his ministry. Notice that not only did they have the desire and willingness but they followed through with the desire. We learn here that in this ministry of giving, there are two things we need to keep in mind. The first is willingness, and the second is following through.

How many times have you seen a particular need and told yourself that you should do something about that need? Maybe you had the intention of giving, but you did not do so right away and then used the money for a different purpose. What we need to understand here is that the leading of the Lord is sometimes a very gentle leading. Like Paul, the Lord does not force us to give. A gift that is forced or compelled is not really a gift. God may put a burden on your heart or show you how to ease the need of a brother or sister. Maybe you have every intention of doing something but never seem to get around to it. This is a real problem when it comes to the ministry of giving. The Lord is constantly moving people to give, but not everyone responds to that call even though they have sensed the Lord's direction. When it comes to the gift of giving, God is looking for people who will not only be sympathetic toward those in need but also do something about it. Desire and willingness without action mean nothing. You can have the willingness, but as long as the money remains in your pocket, you have not ministered.

The other problem experienced in the ministry of giving is the motivation. There are many reasons for giving. Sometimes people give out of obligation and guilt. Sometimes they give to be seen. Sometimes they give because it is what everyone else is doing. Maybe you have found yourself in these situations as well. You gave, but your heart was not in it. In verse 12 Paul reminds us that if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable. In other words, if you want your gift to be acceptable, you need to have a right heart before God in the giving of your gift. You give God no honour if you do not give your gift in love and with a willing heart.

*Give According to What You Have*

The second principle Paul gave to the Corinthians in regard to the ministry of giving was that God only expects us to give what we have (verse 12). This should go without saying, but the reality is that those who have a heart to give will constantly struggle with this principle.

Some time ago I was visiting Haiti. I was overwhelmed by the needs I saw everywhere I turned. The fact of the matter is that one person only has so much to give. How easy it is to feel guilty because we do not have enough for everyone in need. This guilt can very quickly become overwhelming. We need to understand that God does not require that we give what we do not have. God knows that a gift may not appear to be much compared to the great need that exists. Like a little drop of water in a great ocean of need, a gift may appear to make no difference. God can use this gift in ways we could never imagine. If we give as He directs, He will multiply it as He sees fit.

*Seek Equality*

The third principle Paul taught the Corinthians had to do with striving for equality in the body of Christ. In verse 13 Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that it was not his desire to help one person at the expense of another. In other words, if I minister to one person at the expense of another, I have not really changed the situation. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the goal of giving is to bring a greater equality in the body, not to shift the need from one person to another. The goal is that those who have more than they need share with those who have less than they need, so that all will have what is required.

To underline his point, in verse 15 Paul quotes from Exodus 16:18. This particular passage speaks of the time when the Israelites were gathering manna in the wilderness. Those who gathered too much found that the extra they had did not keep. It went bad. God was teaching His people that they were not to seek more than they needed but instead be content with what they had. For this reason, when they collected too much, the excess went bad. The challenge of Paul is to not let our resources go bad when there are others who can use them.

### *We Were Given to Give*

In verse 14 Paul reminded the Corinthians that the surplus of some could minister to the deficit of others. In other words, we are given so that we can give. How easy it is for us to focus so much on ourselves and our future needs that we miss the present needs of those around us. It is true that there is wisdom in putting money and resources away for times of great hardship, but we must be careful that we do not neglect reaching out in the present to those who lack necessities. Paul referred to Exodus 16:18 concerning the collection of manna by the Israelites in the wilderness. No one lacked what was needed. God gives to us so that through us the needs of the body will be met.

Again the principle here is one of equality. If you have plenty and your brother has a lack, ask yourself the question, "Why have I been given so much?" Consider that God may have given you extra so that you can have the privilege of ministering to someone else in their poverty.



*We Are Accountable*

There are many problems that arise when it comes to the use of money in the kingdom of God. Paul reminded the Corinthians of the importance of being accountable before God and others in the use and administration of financial resources.

It is important that we understand a little more of the context of this chapter. In chapter 9 we will see that the church in Corinth had promised a gift (see 9:5; 1 Corinthians 16:1–3). It appears that while they had promised this gift, it had not reached its destination. The Corinthians had put money aside, but it had not been sent to those in need. It was for this reason that the apostle Paul felt it necessary to send some brothers to the church to encourage them to follow through with their promises.

In verse 16 Paul told the Corinthians that God had put a burden on the heart of Titus to see the church in Corinth excel in the grace of giving. There were some real needs in the body of Christ. The larger body needed the resources that the church of Corinth had been putting aside. The time had come to do something about getting that money to those who needed it. Titus shared that same burden. For this reason, Titus decided to visit the church of Corinth and encourage them to follow through with their promise.

Along with Titus, Paul saw fit to send another brother who had proven himself in the service of the gospel. We are not told who this brother was, but we understand that he had gained the respect of the larger community. In verse 19 Paul reminded the Corinthians that the only way that they could honour the Lord in this matter was to follow through with their promise to give.

Paul held the church of Corinth accountable in this matter of the promised gift. He also sent trusted brothers to carry this gift to its destination so that they could avoid any criticism as they administered this gift. Paul reminded them that he took special pains to do what was right, not only before God but also before men. He did not want anyone to have reason to doubt that this gift was being carefully administered. These respected brothers would remove any doubt about how the money was protected and distributed. Especially in this matter of giving and the use of money, Paul did not want anyone to question the honesty and integrity of the church and those who brought the gift to those in need. In this regard, Paul reaffirmed Titus as a true servant of God and one who brought honour to His name. Paul encouraged the church in Corinth to receive these men who were coming to them in love.

What we need to see here is the pains that Paul took to see that the church was held accountable to give what they promised. He also took pains to be sure that those who carried the gift to the needy were also beyond question in their character and honesty.

How many problems arise because of money in the church? How many times have believers been tempted by money? Paul recognized the importance of protecting the reputation of the church by making a very special effort to find people of integrity to handle this delicate matter. We too would do well to take such pains lest our reputation be tarnished. Many ministries have failed in this area of finances. We should be careful to keep in mind the principles that Paul stated in this passage, as we administer the resources of the kingdom.

## For Consideration:

- What role does our attitude play in the matter of giving?
- Have you ever failed to follow through in the giving of a gift? Explain.
- What is the principle of equality that Paul spoke of here? How does this influence how we use the resources God has given us?
- What do we learn here about the importance of accountability in this matter of finances in the church? Why is accountability important in the matter of kingdom finances?

## For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the needs of the body of Christ around you. Ask Him to enable you to follow through on your desire to give.
- Ask the Lord to protect your church from problems that can arise when it comes to the financial matters of the body.
- Ask the Lord to stir up the body of Christ to bring greater equality among believers.

## 16

### THE BLESSINGS OF GIVING

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Read 2 Corinthians 9:1–15

In the last couple of meditations, we saw how the apostle Paul encouraged the brothers and sisters in Corinth to excel in the grace of giving. Paul set out some practical guidelines for giving. He also told them that he was sending trustworthy brothers to Corinth to encourage them to fulfil their promise to take up a collection for the impoverished church in Jerusalem.

Paul had confidence in the Corinthians and their understanding of the need of giving for the expansion of the kingdom of God. The Corinthians were very much aware of the importance of this ministry in the body of Christ. Paul knew they were very ready to help those in need. He had even boasted to others about the eagerness of the Corinthians to contribute. He had mentioned this to the Macedonians, and it had encouraged them (verse 2).

While Paul was encouraged by the enthusiasm of the Corinthians, he felt it necessary to send brothers to them to challenge them to follow through with their promises. He

did not want his boasting in them to be in vain (verse 3). He wanted them to carry through with their desire to give. In the last meditation, we spoke of how easy it is for us to have a desire to give but not follow through in that desire. Paul did not want this to happen in Corinth.

The brothers that Paul sent to the Corinthians were to complete the arrangements for the gift the Corinthians had promised. These brothers coming to Corinth had a three-fold ministry. First, they had the task of administering the resources that had been promised. In other words, they were given the responsibility to make sure that the entire collection and distribution process was accomplished with complete honesty and integrity.

The second responsibility of these brothers had to do with encouraging follow through. The Corinthians had made a promise of a gift. It was their responsibility to follow through on that promise. The brothers arriving in Corinth were to encourage the completion of this offering. They came to hold the Corinthians accountable to their promise and to help them to follow through on it.

The final aspect of their ministry in Corinth was to see that the gift was given with a proper attitude. Verse 5 tells us that as a result of the visit of these brothers, the offering would be a generous gift and not one given unwillingly or with a complaining attitude. Paul felt that the attitude was an important part of the gift. He sent these brothers to encourage the right attitude in giving.

We need to understand that the ministry of giving is an essential part of the expansion of the kingdom of God. Paul was able to do his work because finances were made available to him by willing and cheerful givers. The ministry

of giving was so important that Paul challenged the Corinthians to be very careful that those who gave did so with the right attitude and with accountability. The enemy knows how to use money to destroy the efforts of the kingdom. He will tempt those who are responsible for its administration. He will cause those who give to give with the wrong attitude. He will tempt us to put off our giving until it is no longer in our thoughts and minds.

Paul reminded the Corinthians in verses 6 and 7 of the blessing of the ministry of giving. He told them that God honours those who give with a cheerful heart. When we give cheerfully to the work of the kingdom, we plant seeds that will produce fruit. Paul reminded the believers in Corinth that if they sowed seeds sparingly, they would also reap sparingly. In other words, if they didn't plant many seeds, they could not expect to have much of a harvest. This is how it is in the ministry of giving. If we give with a cheerful heart, God will multiply what we give.

It is true that God can use any gift that comes to Him, but He takes a special delight in those gifts that are given with a cheerful heart. Is it not the same for us as well? Are there not gifts that are very special to us? Maybe that gift came from a loved one. Maybe it was a gift our child gave sacrificially to us. These gifts take on a special meaning. We treasure them and put them in a place of honour. Is it not this way with God? Does He not delight in gifts given with love and cheerfulness? Will He not give those gifts a place of special honour in the kingdom, no matter how big or small they may be?

It is for this reason that Paul challenged the believers of Corinth to cheerfully give what God put on their hearts to give. He reminded them that God loves a cheerful giver. Only when they gave with this cheerful and loving attitude

could they honour God and bless His heart. To give reluctantly under compulsion or obligation does not honour Him.

We know this to be true in our own lives. If we knew that the people offering us a gift were only doing so out of obligation, how would we feel about the gift? Do we honour our loved ones if we offer them a gift with a bitter or resentful attitude? Our attitude in giving is important to God and to others.

In verse 8 Paul told the Corinthians that God is able to make His grace abound to those who give with a cheerful heart. He would provide all that the Corinthians needed if they were willing to give. Even as they provided for others so God would provide for them. God blesses people in proportion to how they bless others (see Proverbs 19:17; Luke 6:38).

Notice what Paul quoted in verse 9: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." This is from Psalm 112:9. God was calling His people to be a righteous people who opened their hands to the poor and ministered to them in their need. God's heart has always been toward those in need. If we have His heart, we will follow His example. An evidence of a right relationship with God is seen in how we minister to those around us.

Paul made it clear to the Corinthians that God was quite willing to increase their seed so that they would have an enlarged harvest of righteousness (verse 10). Notice that the promised harvest here is not a physical harvest but a spiritual harvest of righteousness. God supplies us with the resources necessary so that we can plant them for a spiritual harvest.

There are those who teach that God's desire is to give us a physical and material harvest for our own benefit. They encourage us to give so that we can receive even more for ourselves. They miss the point that Paul is teaching. The harvest is a spiritual harvest of righteousness. We give our resources not to get more back for ourselves but so that there will be a harvest of righteousness. We give so that righteousness will grow in the land and people will come to our Saviour.

Paul underlined this point again in verse 11. Here he told the Corinthians that they had been made rich so that out of their generosity thanksgiving would rise to God. In other words, they were given riches so that they could use them to reach out to others, and as a result, many would praise God. These riches were not for personal ambitions but for others and the expansion of the kingdom of righteousness. God gives so that He can mature us to expand His kingdom. We are mere stewards of His money and resources.

Notice that as we give there are several things that happen. In verse 12 Paul tells us that our giving supplies the needs of God's people. Those who are in need are ministered to in the name of the Lord Jesus. They are relieved from their heavy burden and given hope. These needs are supplied by our gifts.

Notice also in verse 12 that the gifts we give also result in an overflowing of thanksgiving to God. Maybe you have received such a gift. What was your response to a gift given in the name of Jesus that met a very particular need in your life? Did you praise the Lord and give Him thanks? I have seen this in the book writing and distribution ministry the Lord has given me. I have received many letters from believers around the world that began with the words, "I thank the Lord." The first response was to thank God who



moved believers to supply what was necessary. When we give, God receives the glory and honour. When we give, others raise their voices to God in thanksgiving. Giving is a wonderful way to encourage the worship of God. When people see the practical demonstration of God's love through giving, their hearts are moved to praise Him.

Some of the greatest praise and worship to God has been the result of brothers and sisters listening to God, reaching into their pockets, and giving what God put on their hearts to give. In verse 13 Paul reminded the believers of Corinth that people would praise God because of the obedience that accompanied their confession of Christ. In other words, when the Jerusalem believers and others heard about the Corinthians responding to the inner prompting of the Spirit of God to give, they would be encouraged by the Corinthians' faith and lift up a voice of thanksgiving to God.

There is one other result from the ministry of giving: God's people are moved to bring the giver before the Lord in prayer (verse 14). Again, I have seen this in my ministry. I praise the Lord for believers around the world who are praying for me because they received a book in the mail. This, in turn, enables me to continue in this ministry. I will never know here below how much influence those prayers have had. Those prayers have moved the Spirit of God to give me the insight I need as I continue to write. They have moved me to persevere in this ministry and have, no doubt, resulted in greater opportunities and provision from God. When you give, you receive the benefit of the prayer of God's people for you. Your harvest of righteousness increases.

Paul ended this chapter with the following words in verse 15: "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" It is possible that the gift spoken of here is the gift of giving which

results in such wonderful blessing in the lives of those who give and those who receive the gift. That gift, however, is also seen most fully in the person of the Lord Jesus, who is the greatest gift that was ever given and the motivation behind our own giving. Paul gave praise to God for the gift of Christ as well.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn in this chapter about the importance of the gift of giving in the expansion of the kingdom of God?
- Is our attitude important in giving? Explain.
- What does Paul teach us here about the importance of carefully administering the finances in the church today? How are the finances administered in your church?
- What kind of harvest should we be seeking as we sow in the kingdom of God?
- How can it be said that the one who gives is a worship leader?
- What is the result of giving? How does God receive praise through the ministry of giving?

## For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to examine your attitude in giving. Ask Him to give you a right attitude.
- Ask God to open your eyes to the opportunities for generosity that are around you.
- Thank the Lord for the times that He has supplied your need through others in the body.
- Take a moment to pray for those who have been used of God to give to you in your time of need.

## PAUL THE TIMID?

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Read 2 Corinthians 10:1–11

We have seen hints of problems between Paul and certain individuals in Corinth. Paul did have those who opposed him. There were false teachers and others who simply did not like his ministry, and they sought to undermine his authority. Paul was very much aware of these problems and sought to address them.

Notice in verse 1 that some individuals in the church of Corinth were saying that Paul was very bold in his writing but very timid when he was face to face. We need to understand that these individuals were trying to discredit Paul by accusing him of inconsistency. These individuals were saying that Paul wrote boldly to them when he was far away but really didn't have the courage to back up what he said when he was face to face.

In part, these individuals were reacting to a letter Paul had sent to the Corinthians regarding some problems in their assembly. They did not appreciate what Paul had said in this letter, so they resorted to undermining his authority.

Paul appealed to his accusers by the meekness and gentleness of Christ. In other words, he was not responding with anger and bitterness in his heart. He spoke from a heart of humility and gentleness. We all know how easy it is to respond out of anger to those who criticize us. The flesh wants to lash out and seek revenge. Paul was not acting in the flesh here. He spoke as he was led by the Spirit. Facing the arrows of accusation, Paul pulled out his weapons of humility and gentleness. This is how he was going to fight this battle.

Paul admitted that there were times when he did have to be bold in his ministry. He chose, however, to be gentle wherever possible. He begged the Corinthians in verse 2 to deal with this matter before he came so that during his visit he would not have to be forceful toward them.

There were those who said that Paul and the apostles were living by the standards of this world. Paul did not take these accusations lightly because they defamed the character of the servants of God. These accusations were designed to hinder the advance of the kingdom of God by casting doubt on its key leaders. These critics needed to be silenced in the church because they were causing division. Paul was quite willing to come and deal with these individuals personally. He was willing to demonstrate to them how bold he could be. He preferred to come to them in gentleness, however, so he encouraged the church to deal with this matter by themselves as soon as possible.

It is important for us to see the danger of speaking out against the servants of God. It is one thing to deal with a leader who is leading the church astray. It is quite another to condemn and ridicule a man or woman of God because you don't like the way they do things. In either case we

need to be very careful. We do not want to be guilty of undermining the authority of those the Lord has put among us for our edification and encouragement. To do is to fight against God.

David is a clear example of someone who respected and honoured those whom God placed in authority over him. Though Saul sought to kill him, David continued to honour him in his words and deeds. We need to follow his example.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that although believers live in this world, they do not wage war as the world does. We have just seen a clear example of this in the first verse. Paul chose to use the weapons of gentleness and meekness. He knew that the way of the world is very different. The world seeks revenge. It becomes bitter and resentful. It lashes out in an attempt to get even. It returns evil for evil. Paul reminds the Corinthians that these weapons are not from God and have no business in the church.

The weapons of the Spirit are more powerful than the weapons of the world. Spiritual weapons are able to destroy strongholds. Love can break down more barriers than hate. Gentleness will defeat the power of the enemy, whereas, pride only strengthens his grip. Patience will overcome, whereas, impatience will only make matters worse. All these weapons are the fruit of the Spirit of God in us. The Holy Spirit works in us and through us to break down the power of the enemy through the gifts and fruit of the Spirit. All too often, however, we stoop to the ways of the world. We can do tremendous damage if we resort to worldly weapons. It is possible to seek the good of the kingdom of God but to do so in the flesh. Churches can exercise discipline in the flesh. Preachers can preach messages that come from the flesh. It was right for Paul to

boldly condemn the evil in the church of Corinth. He made a special effort, however, to speak and work in the Spirit.

There are those who believe that if we are walking in the Spirit and in love, we will never be severe or condemning. This is not the case. It is quite possible to be angry in the Spirit. When Jesus entered the temple and saw the moneychangers, He became angry. He made a whip and chased the moneychangers out of the temple. God Himself is full of wrath against sin and evil. The reality of hell as a place of eternal punishment is a testimony to the justice of God and His righteous anger. There are those who teach that if we truly love others, we will simply accept people's sin. Any parent knows that true love requires harsh discipline at times. Sometimes love has to risk causing temporary pain in order to develop character.

In verse 5 Paul told the Corinthians that through the power and leading of the Holy Spirit, they could demolish all arguments and every pretension that set itself up against the knowledge of God. In other words, the Spirit of God in believers fights with spiritual weapons to demolish the philosophies and ways of this world that stand against God and His purposes.

Paul used very strong words to describe the activity of believers in the world. We are demolishing strongholds of the enemy. We are tearing down evil philosophies. We are ripping down the fences Satan has put up. We are rescuing people from the grip of the devil who wants to destroy their souls.

Those who walk in the Spirit and minister with spiritual weapons are not weaklings. They are individuals who are filled with passion for the glory of God. They have seen the

devastation that the enemy has inflicted. It is for this reason that believers fight to defeat him. They know that the only solution to the problems of this world is the knowledge of God and His salvation. They will risk their lives for this cause. They do not battle with worldly weapons, but they are filled with passion and holy anger against Satan and his schemes.

The temptation is very real for us, as we step into battle, to do whatever comes naturally to our flesh. We will be tempted to become angry and bitter. We will be tempted to pick up the arms of the enemy and fight him with his own weapons. Paul reminds us here in verse 5 that we are, however, to take every thought captive and make it obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ. For the Christian soldier, this means taking captive those evil and revengeful thoughts and attitudes. It means dying to what comes naturally to the flesh and doing things God's way. It means coming to Jesus for the healing of bitterness and wrong attitudes. It means forgiving those who have hurt us. It means refusing to do battle using wrong motives. Every evil thought or lie must be stopped and captured by the truth of the Word of God. We must face the enemy with the mind and heart of the Lord Jesus.

There are many who are fighting the battle around them but are not fighting the battle within. They are trying to advance the kingdom of God, but they are resentful and unpleasant. They have picked up the weapons of jealousy and revenge. They have lost the inward battle against their own sin. They may even fight for the same principles as their brother or sister, but they are fighting with the worldly weapons. Only when we understand this can we really wage spiritual war as we should and fight for Christ instead of against him.



In verse 6 Paul reminded the Corinthians that he was ready to punish every act of disobedience once the faithful had separated themselves from those who were living in sin. Paul wanted the lines clearly drawn between the two sides before he came. If the rebellious refused to repent Paul would exercise the discipline necessary.

In verse 7 Paul told those who had been speaking out against him that they had only been looking on the surface of things. In other words, they were not considering all the facts. They were only seeing things as they wanted to see them. He reminded them that he belonged to the Lord Jesus as much as they did. Notice that Paul does not call their salvation into question. He considered these individuals to be brothers and sisters in the Lord. They had a common spiritual bond. Paul was telling these individuals that they were on the same team. They needed to consider how they expected to win the war if, instead of shooting the enemy, they turned their guns on their fellow soldiers.

What army, expecting to defeat the enemy, would spend its time trying to undermine the authority of its very own leaders? If we are on the same team, why do we spend our time arguing with each other instead of doing battle against our opponents? How often the enemy has divided us. So many churches have failed in their attempts to advance the kingdom because they have spent all their time criticizing and arguing among themselves.

Paul reminded his accusing brothers and sisters that they needed to realize that the Lord Jesus had given him and his fellow apostles their authority. This authority had been given to them to build up the church and not tear it down. Paul's accusers had been opposing the work the Lord had called him to do. The Lord had chosen and equipped Paul

for this ministry. This had been confirmed by all the apostles and the Corinthian church itself. God's hand was on Paul for the purpose of building up the church of God.

Paul reminded his accusers in verse 8 that he had nothing to be ashamed of before God. He had lived and ministered with a clear conscience in the authority God had given him. Before undermining Paul's authority, these individuals were fighting against the Lord's faithful servant. This was a very dangerous position for them to be in.

In verse 9 Paul went on to say that it was not his intention to frighten the Corinthians with his letters. There were those who were saying that Paul's letters were weighty and forceful, but his messages were meaningless and unimpressive. Paul's intention, however, was to build up the kingdom of God whether in his letters or in his preaching. There were times when Paul did have to speak forcefully on certain matters. His purposes were honourable, and his desire was to see the kingdom expanded in Corinth. Paul told his accusers that when he came to them, he would demonstrate that it wasn't only his letters that were forceful but he could also be forceful in person. He would not hesitate to speak to them and take the appropriate action to deal with their rebellion against God.

## For Consideration:

- There were individuals who did not accept Paul's ministry. Jesus also had many enemies. Should we expect that everyone will love us?
- Have you ever been tempted to do battle with the enemy using the weapons of the flesh? Explain. Can you ever have victory with these weapons?
- In what ways has the enemy been successful in dividing believers in the church today?
- Have you ever found yourself tempted to criticize those in authority over you? What do we learn here about the dangers of doing this?

## For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to accept the differences that exist between fellow believers and yourself.
- Thank the Lord that He uses us just as we are.
- Take a moment to confess any wrong attitudes you have toward another believer in Christ. Ask God to enable you to be an encourager.
- Take a moment to pray for those in authority over you. Ask God to bless and keep them true to Him and His Word.

## 18

### BOASTING IN THE LORD

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Read 2 Corinthians 10:12–18

We have seen how the ministry of the apostle Paul had been brought into question by certain people in Corinth. These individuals questioned his character and authority and had caused divisions in the church of Corinth. Paul was compelled to speak to the Corinthians about this matter. Some of the things Paul said had been misinterpreted by his enemies as being boastful. In the last meditation, for example, he told the Corinthians that he had been called and anointed to minister as an apostle and that he had done nothing to disgrace that ministry. These words could have been twisted by the enemy to seem boastful.

This led Paul to a brief discussion about boasting. To boast is to glory in an object. It is to rejoice in and be proud of something or someone. There are certainly times when our boasting is fruitless and even sinful. Not all boasting, however, needs to be considered in the same light. Let's consider what Paul said here about boasting.

*Boasting Based on the Wrong Standard*

Paul began in verse 12 by telling the Corinthians that he did not dare to classify or compare himself with others who commended themselves. How easy it is to compare ourselves to others. If we feel that we are equal to them or even better than they are, we feel we have reason to be confident and proud of where we are. Paul told the Corinthians that he did not dare to do this. The fact of the matter is that the standard by which we live is not determined by others but by the Word of God.

All too often, we use people to be the measuring stick by which we compare ourselves. The enemy delights to have us judge ourselves by human standards instead of by the Word of God. Paul told the Corinthians that he did not dare to compare himself to those who commended themselves by their own standards while ignoring the standards of God's Word.

Over and over again in the history of the church, people have fallen prey to this tactic of the enemy. The people of Israel very often turned from the Word of God and set up their own standards. It is quite possible to boast in the fact that we are better than someone else when, in reality, we are still living below the standard God has set for us.

Those who compare themselves to others and measure themselves according to their own standards are not wise. In the end, God's judgment will not be based on human comparisons. God will judge based on one standard alone, and that is the standard of His Word. One person may be as good as or better than someone else and still perish. We need to lift up our eyes. We need to compare ourselves with the Word of God alone.

*Boasting in What God Has Given*

Paul told the Corinthians secondly that his boasting was confined to the area that God had given him (verse 13). Paul's boasting was in what God had called him to do. Paul delighted in his calling. He was a chosen apostle and rejoiced that he was used of God to reach out to countless Gentile souls. Paul was proud to be a servant of God.

If you were asked by the leader of your country to be his or her representative, would you not be grateful to have that position? If your local church recognized you as an anointed servant of God and set you apart for the ministry of the gospel, would you not rejoice as you took up this calling?

Paul was grateful to be used of God in ministry. He delighted that God had brought souls into the kingdom through him. He rejoiced in the fact that God had used him to bring comfort and encouragement to the body of Christ. Paul was not ashamed of what God was doing in and through him. The boasting Paul spoke of here was not a boasting in himself or his natural abilities. He knew well that it was the power of God that accomplished all that was good in his ministry. Paul's boasting was in the Lord. He boasted in what God was doing in him as a mere servant.

What has God given you? What is his calling on your life? Exercise that calling with gratitude and joy. Lift up your head. You are a child of God and His chosen servant. Wear your uniform with pride. Recognize your own weaknesses and unworthiness, but delight in His desire to use you. Let it thrill your heart and fill you with joy to be His servant. Praise Him for choosing you and using you. Focus on Him and what He has been doing and not on yourself. Paul boasted of the great things God had given him while, at the same time, keeping sight of his own unworthiness.

There are many who boast in their ministries who have lost the sense of wonder in God having chosen them. Paul never lost that sense of wonder and amazement. We know we have crossed the line when we begin to feel that somehow we deserve our position or calling. Our boasting then begins to take on a different flavour. Instead of centring on God, it is centred on us. We lose the sense of praise that He should choose us. Instead we become puffed up and consider ourselves better than others because of our blessings. Paul's boasting was confined to what God was doing.

### *Boasting in the Work of Others*

In verse 15 Paul reminded the believers in Corinth that his boasting was not in what others had done. Have you ever found yourself wanting to take credit for something that someone else had done? Paul had a powerful ministry among the Corinthians. There were, no doubt, many who had come to the Lord under his ministry. How easy it would have been for Paul to say, "If it weren't for me, nothing would have happened in Corinth." How easy it would have been for Paul to take the credit for all the spiritual growth among the Corinthians.

Maybe as you read this commentary, you are being influenced by the teaching of the Word. Maybe you will then take what you have learned here and share it with someone else. Maybe that person will be touched and a life changed as a result of your sharing what I have written. Can I take the credit for your witness?

Sometimes we can become so desperate to feel useful that we will try to find anything we can to take the credit. We are encouraged here not to fall into this trap. We do

not take the credit for the ministry of others but delight in our simple role (see 1 Corinthians 3:4–7).

Notice that Paul's desire was not to reach a few souls and let those souls do the work while he sat back and took the credit. His desire was to continue to bear fruit through his own labour. His hope in verse 15 was that the faith of the Corinthians would grow so he could be set free to go elsewhere with the gospel. He wanted the Corinthians to mature and rejoice in the work God had given them. He wanted them to share in the glory and joy of bearing fruit.

Paul's rejoicing and boasting was in the privilege he had in being a servant of God. He did not boast of his own achievements but boasted in the work of God, whether that was through him or through others.

Paul concluded in verse 18 by reminding the Corinthians that self-commendation is meaningless. God is the true judge of everyone's life. Sometimes we might try to comfort ourselves with self-praise for our accomplishments. But what we think is not really important because, ultimately, it is only what God thinks that matters. Christ alone will judge our lives (see also 5:10).

Let me summarize what Paul is telling us in this section. He reminds us that there are those whose boasting is based on the wrong standard. They compare themselves to others and not the Word of God. He also reminds us that our boasting should be in the things that God is doing in us. If what we are boasting in is not our own, it would be foolish to draw attention to ourselves. The attention and praise must go to God alone. We are, however, to proudly lift up our heads as His servants, delighting in the way He has chosen to use us and gratefully spending our lives for



His kingdom. The focus of our boast is in God and His wonderful work in us.

For Consideration:

- Why is it so dangerous to compare ourselves to others instead of comparing ourselves to the Word of God?
- Are you delighting in the work that God is doing in you? What is that work?
- What is the difference between boasting in ourselves and in what God is doing?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the ministry and the gifts He has given you.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for any shame you may have felt as His servant. Ask Him to let you walk gratefully and joyfully in the ministry He has given you.
- Ask the Lord to enable you to keep His Word alone as your standard.
- Ask God to help you boast not in your own efforts but in the wonderful work He has chosen to do in you.

- Ask God to enable you to live such a life that He would be proud of you.

# 19

## ATTACK OF THE "SUPER APOSTLES"

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Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–15

One of the problems with the church in Corinth was that there were individuals among them who called themselves apostles but were not. These individuals were undermining the authority of Paul and the other true apostles. Paul was concerned about the lies these individuals were teaching and that they might mislead the people of God into error. He addressed this matter here in chapter 11.

Paul began by asking the church to bear with him. "I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness," he told them in verse 1. This was not to imply that Paul really believed that what he was saying was actually foolishness. What he spoke about here were matters that may have seemed trivial to someone else, but to Paul they were very serious. He spoke of these concerns as foolishness because not everyone understood his passion for them.

In a similar way, not everyone will understand your ministry or your focus. The burden God has put on your heart will not be the same as the burden that someone else bears. There were times when the church did not understand the burden God put on Paul's heart. That burden was so great that Paul could not keep silent. These issues burned on his heart. Even if people saw him as foolish, he needed to speak as he was led by the Spirit.

Paul's particular foolishness here was a jealousy for the church in Corinth. His jealousy was a godly virtue. It was a passion in his heart to see the church of Corinth grow in maturity and be the pure bride of Christ. Paul had committed this church to the Lord Jesus, and his deep desire was that she would be presented to the Lord Jesus as a pure virgin, free and cleansed of all impurity. So great was his jealousy for this that people saw him as being extreme. This is why Paul asked the church to bear with his foolishness.

This passion for the purity of the church drove Paul to great lengths. He would suffer the insults and rejection of many because of his deep jealousy to see the church of God be a pure and spotless bride for the Lord Jesus. He would finally give his life in order to see this passion realized.

What is your passion in ministry? Without passion we do not get very far in service for the kingdom. Without passion we are tossed from one thing to another. Passion gives us incentive and drive. It keeps us going when things are difficult and everything seems to be against us. It enables us to push aside the comments of others and set our eyes on the goal. Paul's passion is very clear.

In verse 3 Paul told the Corinthians that he was afraid that just as Eve was deceived in the Garden of Eden by Satan,

so they were also being deceived and led astray from their pure devotion to Christ. Notice that Paul used the phrase "pure devotion." There was no question in the mind of Paul that the church was committed to the Lord Jesus. They were gathering regularly in the name of Jesus, and they did not hesitate to call themselves Christians or followers of Jesus. Paul was concerned, however, that their devotion was not pure. They were being distracted in their commitment to the Lord Jesus. They were abandoning a simple devotion to Christ for the errors of the false teachers.

Paul's concern was that the bride of Christ be totally devoted to Christ. Paul would not be content as long as the church was not pure in her commitment to the Lord. Maybe this is what got him in trouble with other believers of his day. Paul was not interested in the church having one foot in the world and the other foot in the faith. He wanted to see a church that was sold out completely to the Lord Jesus. He wanted to present to the Lord Jesus a church that was totally in love with Him and loyal to Him and Him alone. How easy it is for us to be half-hearted in our relationship with God. We say we love Him, but are we fully and totally committed to Him? What a challenge this verse is to us.

Paul noticed that the church of Corinth really did not have the maturity necessary to recognize truth from error. He reminded these believers that they were putting up with those who were not preaching the pure gospel. The false apostles were not preaching the same Christ that Paul preached, and the Corinthians were not rejecting this attack of Satan. They were allowing lies to continue without exposing them. This fanned into flame Paul's jealousy.

In verse 5 Paul spoke of these individuals as "super-apostles," not because he believed what they said but because of how they presented themselves. They came into the church of Corinth giving the impression that they had the truth. They came lifting themselves above the true apostles. They came with boastful claims and tried to undermine the authority and teaching of Paul.

Paul reminded the church in Corinth that he was not a trained speaker like these super-apostles. Being a persuasive speaker was much respected in the culture at this time. While he was not as eloquent as these so called super apostles, Paul had been called by God and was in no way inferior to them. He reminded the Corinthians in verse 6 that he had communicated the truth to them.

People are easily deceived by good speakers. These individuals are easy to listen to and entertaining. They preach with force and know just how to move the crowd. They gather a large following of those who are easily persuaded. Smooth talkers do not always tell the truth. The church of Corinth risked falling into the trap of exchanging entertaining preaching for the truth about Christ.

There was another issue that Paul's accusers used against him. Not only was Paul not a trained speaker like the super-apostles, but he also offered the gospel free of charge. When Paul came into a region, he did not come expecting people to serve him. He did not demand to be paid for preaching. In order to support himself, he did manual labour. The false apostles felt that manual work was beneath their dignity. They would never have been caught with a shovel or hammer in their hands. They were arrogant and lazy and demanded respect. They expected people to pay them for what they had to say.

Paul was humble and ready to work with his hands. When he needed money, he worked as a tentmaker to support his ministry (see Acts 18:3). He chose not to take a salary from the churches in which he ministered but worked free of charge among them. When people saw Paul with his old, dirty work clothes, they may have had a hard time respecting him as a great spiritual leader. How could he be an anointed apostle if he had to work hard to earn his living just like the average person? People were not only being fooled by the way the super-apostles spoke but also by the way they dressed, behaved, and demanded to be paid.

Fancy clothes do not make a great leader. Having a nice home or a nice car does not symbolize success in the kingdom of God. Jesus avoided these things and lived a very simple life. Paul followed in His steps. The false apostles, on the other hand, tried to lift themselves up above the level of the average person, demanding a worldly type of respect. Many fell into their trap and listened to them because they had money and dressed with fancy clothes. People were being deceived by outward appearances. Some of the greatest saints have dressed in old, tattered work clothes and lived lives that did not attract the attention of this world.

Paul's burden was to share the gospel free of charge so his motives would be seen as pure. However, the false teachers used this against him, suggesting that he was a counterfeit who did not deserve to be paid. In verse 7 Paul asked his accusers how his behaviour could be misinterpreted as sin when he had humbled himself in order to lift the Corinthians out of their sin. Other churches had suffered financially so that the Corinthians could receive the gospel free of charge (verse 8). Paul was able to minister in Corinth without asking for money because of the generous gifts of other believers (verse 9). Brothers had come

from Macedonia to supply Paul with a gift to enable him to continue preaching in Corinth. The apostle Paul had financial struggles. He was not a rich man, but he offered the message of the gospel free of charge to all who would receive it.

Paul did not hesitate to reveal or even boast about how he was supported in his ministry. He compared his humble ways to the proud manner of the false apostles who were in Corinth. He did this because of his deep love for the Corinthians and in order to encourage their true devotion to Christ and His gospel. Paul did not want to see the Corinthians falling into a trap that would keep them from becoming a completely pure bride of Christ. The false teachers spoke well, dressed well, and demanded a large payment—all behaviours respected in the culture—but these men were actually enemies of the church.

Paul wanted to expose these enemies for who they really were. He would continue to speak out harshly against them in order to undermine their evil intentions. He wanted to cut the ground out from under them so they would not continue to enjoy the respect of true apostles (verse 12). By refusing to accept financial support from the Corinthians, Paul distanced himself from the false teachers.

In verse 13 Paul told the church that these men were imposters. They were deceivers who wore the mask of an apostle. Paul spoke against them openly and severely. He told the Corinthians that these individuals were agents of Satan, who is a master of disguise. Satan parades around like an angel of light when he is, in reality, the father of darkness. This is what these super-apostles were doing. They hid behind entertaining sermons and fancy clothes. Beneath their outward show, however, were wolves and agents of Satan who had come to destroy the work of God



in Corinth. The true apostle reminded the Corinthian church that the day would come when these false apostles would be exposed and receive their just reward (verse 15).

This section calls us to be more alert to what is happening around us. Satan will not hesitate to send his own agents into our churches dressed up as servants of righteousness. How careful we need to be lest we are deceived by the super-apostles of our own day.

#### For Consideration:

- Who were the super-apostles Paul spoke of in this passage? How did they disguise themselves?
- Paul's particular passion here was that the church be presented as a bride purely devoted to Lord Jesus. Have you been content with a devotion that is less than pure? Explain.
- What particular passion has the Lord given you? How have you been faithful in that passion?
- Do you think that Satan still sends his super-apostles into the church to deceive and mislead? How can we be on guard against such people?

#### For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the passion He wants you to have. Ask Him to give you boldness to minister in that passion.

- Ask the Lord to reveal to you any impurity in your own devotion to Him.
- Ask the Lord to expose the false apostles of our day so that they will no longer deceive the church and lead her astray.
- Ask the Lord to give more gifts of discernment to the church so that false teaching and error will be exposed.

## A BIT OF WORLDLY BOASTING

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Read 2 Corinthians 11:16–33

We have seen in this epistle that the apostle Paul felt compelled to set out his credentials before those who accused him. There were those in Corinth who questioned his authority as a servant of God. These individuals tried to lift themselves up above Paul. In the last meditation, we saw how the super-apostles were actually pseudo-apostles and demanded respect and money from those who listened to them. Unlike Paul, they believed that manual labour was beneath their dignity. Many were fooled by the outward appearance of these false teachers.

There are people in our day who are fooled like the Corinthians. I have often found it frustrating to see how much emphasis we place in our day on educational degrees and titles. Somehow we are deceived into thinking that if people have a certain education, they will be good leaders. Too often we respect these individuals not because they are passionate servants of God but because they had the

money to get a good education. Too often individuals with powerful gifts are refused positions because they do not have a certificate or diploma from a Bible school or seminary. Please do not misunderstand what I am saying here. I am not saying that we should not train pastors and Christian workers—my ministry is devoted to this end. What I am saying, however, is that we ought to be very careful not to look at the externals alone. There are many wonderful servants of God who do not have a strong formal education. Some are serving in humble jobs, but they are powerful servants of God.

Paul realized that people had been speaking lies about him in the church of Corinth. We have already seen that some considered him to be a fool. In verse 16 Paul directly addressed this matter: “Let no one take me for a fool,” he told them. Paul knew that he was qualified to do the ministry God had called him to do despite what others were saying. He pleaded with the Corinthians to listen to what he had to say, even if they considered him to be a fool. If they saw him as a fool, then he would speak to them as a fool. While he thought it was foolish that they insisted on credentials, he would show them his credentials.

Paul told the Corinthians that in boasting about his credentials, he was not speaking as the Lord would speak (verse 17). Because the Corinthians were impressed by worldly credentials, he would stoop to their level to prove his apostleship. Paul did not boast for personal praise. He made it quite clear that all the things he was going to say about himself were a worldly way of looking at authority. He knew that the Lord’s understanding of credentials is very different from that of the world.

While I am thankful for my education, I have come to understand that my theological degrees mean absolutely

nothing to the Lord. My training has been helpful. It has equipped me for the ministry that God has given me, but my dependence cannot be on my education. It is not theological degrees or diplomas that will expand the kingdom of God. You may not have a single degree or diploma hanging on your wall. You may not be a great speaker or teacher, but if the Spirit of God is calling you and you are living in obedience, you can be sure that God will use you in ways you could never imagine. The Lord Jesus is looking for willing and open hearts. Paul understood this.

Paul reminded the Corinthians how they had already been listening to fools—the false apostles in their assembly (verse 19). They had allowed these false teachers to rob them of freedom in Christ as well as money. The Corinthians tolerated imposters who spiritually bullied them. The Corinthians embraced all this heresy and disrespect.

In verse 21 Paul sarcastically told the Corinthians that he was “too weak” to abuse them in these many ways. What he meant was that he did not exploit and crush the people of God for his personal ambitions. He did not step on them to get respect. Unlike these false apostles, Paul showed great love and care for the Corinthians. This made him appear weak in their eyes. Because they had not separated themselves from the values of the Greek culture, the Corinthians were deceived into honouring their rich counterfeit teachers who demanded respect while discounting the humble but true apostles of the gospel.

Paul took the time to do some worldly boasting. He had already said that credentials really did not mean much to him, but by speaking of his worldly qualifications for ministry, he was attempting to show the Corinthians that he had even better qualifications for spiritual leadership than those in their midst who were misleading them.

Paul began by telling the Corinthians in verse 22 that if these super-apostles were Hebrews, he was also. If they were Israelites, so was he. He too was a descendant of Abraham. In Paul's ancestry and upbringing, he was as pure-blooded as the false teachers.

Because the false apostles claimed to be servants of Christ, Paul showed himself to be superior in service. Again in verse 23 Paul expressed his reluctance to boast: "I am out of my mind to talk like this," but he believed that he had to in order to defend his authority. Paul did not list his worldly successes here, but his sufferings. Paul's strategy was to discredit the false teachers by showing that they were not like Christ who suffered greatly for the kingdom of God, as did Paul. Paul reminded the Corinthians that compared to the imposters, he had worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, was whipped more severely, and was in danger of dying on more occasions during his service of the Lord Jesus than any of these false apostles in their midst.

Five times Paul received thirty-nine lashes from the Jews. The Mosaic Law permitted forty lashes, but the Jews gave one less so as not to transgress the law while punishing someone. That was not the end of Paul's suffering for the Lord Jesus. He was also beaten with rods, stoned three times, and shipwrecked during his missionary journeys. He spent a night and a day in the open sea with waves threatening to drown him (verse 25). He was constantly living in danger. He had been in peril from rivers, bandits, Gentiles, and even his own countrymen. He suffered persecution in cities wherever he went and also had to deal with the opposition of false teachers (such as those in Corinth).

As a servant of God, Paul had laboured, toiled, and had gone without sleep, food, and water. He knew what it was

like to be hungry, cold, and have no clothes to put on. In addition to all these matters, Paul had the concern of the churches on his mind and heart. This alone was a pressure that many would not want to bear. Paul told the Corinthians in verse 29: "Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?"

Do you see what Paul was saying here? When someone in one of the churches was weak and failing, he felt that weakness as if it were his own. When someone was led into sin, his own heart burned with grief and holy anger. As a pastor for these churches, Paul felt their pain very personally and deeply. This is the heart of a godly pastor. Every pastor ought to personally feel what the church is going through.

To truly care for a church, you need to feel the sorrows and joys of that church. You need to grieve for those who are in moral failure. You need to weep with those who are crying out in distress. You need to be sensitive to the weakness in faith of the members of that church. Much more than simply teaching, the pastor needs to emotionally participate in what his church is going through. That is why being a pastor is a task that not everyone should aspire to. You cannot be a true pastor if you do not have the emotional capacity to lovingly identify with those that God has put under your charge. This is the compassion of Christ burning in the heart of His true servant.

By boasting in his humiliations and sufferings, Paul glorified God's grace that had sustained him during hardships. He did not live a life of ease and comfort as did the false apostles. His life was difficult, and he suffered much by rejections and insults. God knew he was telling the truth (verse 31). To the Greek mind, Paul was weak and defeated; to the Christian mind, he led a triumphant life.

When Paul was in the city of Damascus, King Aretas had the whole city placed under guard in order to arrest him (verse 32). If the believers in that city had not lowered him down the city wall in a basket, Paul would have been arrested and maybe even killed. Paul was brought close to death constantly in the advancement of the gospel. The great apostle had to humbly hide in a basket while other believers helped him escape for his life.

The false teachers in Corinth did not have to face such opposition from Satan because they were his agents. They were comfortable and living prosperously and carefree. They did not have to worry about their next meal or where they were going to sleep. They did not have to go about naked for lack of clothes to wear. They slept safely in comfortable beds at night. For these worldly accomplishments, the people of Corinth respected them.

Paul, on the other hand, was on the front line of the battle, warring with the enemy head on. He was being bombarded with all that the enemy could throw at him and yet persevering triumphantly by God's marvellous grace. May God help us to reject the ungodly values of our culture and fight the good fight for the expansion of the kingdom no matter the cost.

For Consideration:

- What does this section teach us about the problem in the church of Corinth regarding how they saw their leaders? Can we fall into the same trap today?
- What things do we look for in leaders today? What is the difference between the worldly way of looking at the qualifications of a leader and what the Lord is looking for?



- While it is important to get the training necessary for the advancing of the kingdom, why is it wrong to trust in training and education alone? What should we be trusting in?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the fact that He has put His Holy Spirit in us to enable and equip us in ministry.
- Ask the Lord to set you free from the temptation to be respected because of your education and training. Ask Him to help you to see the folly of this.
- Ask the Lord to give you the courage of Paul to persevere to the end.
- Thank the Lord that He is able to use you as you are. Surrender your life afresh to Him for His use.

## 21

### A THORN IN THE FLESH

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Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10

In the church of Corinth, there were individuals who were struggling against Paul and his methods. False apostles had come into the church and were turning their followers against Paul. Paul was compelled to defend his spiritual leadership to the Corinthians. To do this, he laid out his qualifications as an apostle.

In verses 1–7 Paul continued speaking to the Corinthians about his experiences and qualifications. Paul did not place great value on all these qualifications. He listed them for the Corinthians because this appealed to their worldly standard, but Paul was not going to base his authority on his education and experience. His intention was not to promote himself like the false teachers, but to promote Christ. Despite the fact that Paul did not want to get caught up in these matters, he went on to speak more fully of his worldly qualifications as a servant of Christ. He did this for the sake of the Corinthians and his relationship with them. By showing them his qualifications, Paul was establishing his credibility as an apostle in the eyes of the doubting Corinthians.

In verse 1 Paul spoke about his visions. This was a very important matter for Paul because these visions had a powerful impact on his life. The book of Acts records six of Paul's visions and the books Galatians and Ephesians speak of further revelations he received.

Paul told the Corinthians in verse 2 that he knew a man who was in Christ, who, fourteen years earlier, was caught up into the third heaven. There are a few things we need to understand here.

Notice first that the apostle Paul spoke about a certain man he knew. Commentators agree that this man was the apostle Paul himself. Paul seems to distance himself from the event. He spoke this way perhaps to minimize any boasting and to stress his unworthiness of such an honour.

Notice second that Paul was caught up into the third heaven. The Jews believed that there were three heavens. The first heaven was the sky. This was the place where the birds fly. It surrounded the earth as we know it. The second heaven was where the stars, the sun, and the moon are located. We would call this outer space. The third heaven in the Jewish mind was the place where God lives.

In verse 2 Paul told the Corinthians about how real this vision was to him. He told them that to this day he did not know if he was really caught up into heaven in his body or whether it was in his spirit. The vision was so real that he felt he was physically in the presence of God. The vision was so powerful that Paul still could not imagine that he had experienced it. This is why he spoke about it as happening to "a man" and did not easily speak of it as being his own personal experience, even though it was.

Paul told the Corinthians that he was taken into paradise (verse 4) and heard inexpressible things that he was not permitted to tell. God revealed things to him, but he was not to speak of them to anyone. Why would God show Paul things that he was not permitted to share with anyone else? There may be different reasons for this. Partly, it could have been due to the fact that God wanted to impact Paul and his ministry. This vision would have communicated something very powerful to Paul. It would give him the incentive and drive to move on in his ministry with new zeal and effort. It could also be that the Lord showed Paul these things to communicate the depth of intimacy he had with him. As a former persecutor of the Christian church, Paul needed to know this intimacy and call on his life in a special way.

There are things we only share with certain people. These people are special to us. For example, if you are married, there are things you share with your spouse that you will not share with anyone else. God shared things with Paul that he did not share with other people. Paul never revealed these private things. Through this experience God strengthened his faith to endure much suffering for the gospel and to persevere to the end of God's plan for his life.

Paul told the Corinthians that he would boast in this man but not in himself, except in his weakness. This man that Paul described here was in the very presence of God. He was at such a level of intimacy with God that he knew the secret things of God and experienced Him in a way that others have never experienced. Paul could boast about a man like this, but this was not his present experience. Paul knew that he was far from this level of intimacy with God in his flesh.

What Paul saw that day kept him humble. He never forgot his experience. At the present time, however, he was also aware of how far from that he was. Yes, he was a great apostle. Yes, God had used him in an incredible way, but Paul's vision had showed him that no matter how high he was raised in this life, it was nothing compared to what he had experienced in that vision in the presence of God. He knew that he could not boast in himself and all his achievements after that experience. He chose to boast of his weaknesses and how God used him despite those frailties (verse 5).

How weak and foolish our boasting really is. Imagine a world-famous mathematician boasting that he knew his multiplication tables. Imagine a great doctor boasting that he knew how to put a bandage on a wound. Imagine a great marathon runner boasting that he walked to his friend's house next door without getting tired. This is what all worldly boasting was like for Paul—it all seemed so foolish and hollow. Seeing heavenly things stripped him of all desire to boast of any earthly achievements. Maybe we all need to see that same vision.

Moving from the heavenly perspective back to the things of this world, Paul knew that he had a worldly reason to boast in the flesh (verse 6). Humanly speaking, he had accomplished more than anyone else. He had suffered and seen more than anyone else. Paul did not want to speak of all these things lest people should see him as being more than he really was. He knew that he was a simple man like anyone else. He knew the weakness of his own sinful human flesh. He was tempted to pride because of his accomplishments, just like anyone else.

In verse 7 Paul told the Corinthians that God had given him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from getting too proud and

conceited. We are not told what that thorn in the flesh was. Paul described it as a “messenger of Satan” that came to torment him. Some see this thorn as Paul’s poor eye sight. This, however, is not clearly stated.

We need to learn an important lesson here in verse 7. This messenger of Satan was given to Paul for a specific reason—to keep him from becoming proud. Satan was given permission to afflict Job in the Old Testament, and God used that torment to accomplish His purposes. There are times that God ordains suffering so that we can be more effectively used. Paul’s visions and revelations would have normally been too much for him to handle. Pride would have set in and his ministry would have suffered or been destroyed.

Notice in verse 8 that Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to take this affliction away, but the Lord would not do so. Instead, God told Paul that He wanted him to be weak in this area so that through his weakness the power of God could be demonstrated. When Moses was in the prime of his life God sent him to the desert. There in the desert over a forty-year period, God broke the pride of Moses. He humbled him and gave him the task of being a simple shepherd. This was the thorn Moses had to bear for forty years.

Paul was asked to bear an affliction. He was asked to put up with a messenger of Satan who had come to torment him. Paul’s victory over this messenger would come not by that messenger being removed but by God supplying the necessary grace for Paul to persevere while this messenger constantly nipped at his heels. God can give us victory over an affliction by taking it away from us, or He can give us victory by giving us strength to endure it. We all want to

be set free from our suffering, but God sometimes calls us to face the enemy head on and wrestle with him to the end.

When he was quite young, my son played on a baseball team. There were times that his team would win their match because not enough players from the other team showed up to play. When this happened his team would win the game without even playing. In the game of life, there are times when God will give us victory without us ever having to struggle with the enemy. There are other times, however, when we will be called to play the game and do battle. In either case, victory is assured.

God called Paul to play the game and face the enemy head on. He asked Paul to persevere and wrestle to the end with this thorn of affliction. And that was what Paul did. Paul spoke proudly of his weaknesses because he saw the power of Christ in this weakness. He knew that triumphant, faithful living was not because of his natural strength, but because of God's grace. All the glory went to God. There were many struggles for Paul. He often clashed with the enemy and had to play hard in order to win the game. He did so with a messenger of Satan tormenting him all the way. Through this suffering Paul learned complete dependence on the God of all grace. The more we understand our weakness, the more we will understand God's powerful grace that uses all circumstances for our good and His glory.

I don't know what thorn is in your flesh. I have personally wrestled for many years with depression. While I have had times when I wondered if I was ever going to get through, I have often seen the victory of the Lord. I know that God can take this away completely, but I also know that if He should choose to call me to fight this messenger of Satan

to the end, I will be given the strength necessary to triumph. I am also aware that God will use it in my life to keep me humble and enable me to minister more effectively through it to others.

For Consideration:

- How did Paul's vision help him in ministry? How does having a heavenly perspective keep us from boasting about our achievements?
- What was the purpose of Paul's thorn in the flesh? Do you have a thorn in the flesh? How has God been using it in your life?
- How does our victory in the midst of ongoing suffering testify to the grace and enabling of Christ?

For Prayer:

- Thank God that He can give us victory by enabling us to bear our affliction. Thank Him that He can also give us victory by removing suffering from us.
- If you have a thorn in your flesh that God has chosen not to remove, commit yourself to defeating it by persevering to the end.
- Ask God to use your affliction to enable you to minister more effectively for the sake of His kingdom.



- Ask God to help you to see the foolishness of boasting in human qualifications. Thank Him instead for His great grace and mercy in your life.

## 22

# NO BURDEN TO YOU

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Read 2 Corinthians 12:11–21

In the first half of this chapter, the apostle Paul spoke about his thorn in the flesh. In the second part of this chapter, Paul told the Corinthians that it was not his intent to be a thorn in their flesh or a heavy burden to them. He wanted to show them instead that all he did was for their benefit and blessing because he loved them dearly.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that he had made a fool of himself because they had driven him to it. He did this by boasting of his worldly qualifications. He was also considered a fool because of his intensity and devotion to Christ and His cause. He was willing to lay down his life for the cause of his Lord and for those he served. He suffered much affliction and persecution for this, but he did not give up. In the eyes of the world, this also was great foolishness.

In Corinth certain individuals had set themselves up as apostles. These individuals bragged about themselves and demanded respect and money for their preaching.

They were the type that refused to dirty themselves with manual labour. They came into a community and expected the community to provide for their every need. They dressed in fine clothes, and people looked up to them. Paul was not like these individuals. He would not have stood out in a crowd. He was a simple, ordinary man who worked as hard as anyone else. He supported his ministry by physical labour so he could preach free of charge everywhere he went. He suffered much for the message he spoke and was often rejected, beaten, and threatened with death. He was considered a fool for this.

Notice how Paul told the Corinthians that they were the ones who had driven him to this folly of explaining all these afflictions as a way to show his spiritual authority. His best credentials were the changed lives of the Corinthians he had ministered to. Many had been saved, and a church had been established. These Corinthians should have been speaking up for Paul instead of being silent and forcing him to speak up for himself (verse 11). He had received his apostleship by grace and not because he was anybody special. He was not inferior in any way to the false teachers in Corinth, although he ministered in a very different way. All the marks of a true apostle were clearly in evidence in his life (verse 12).

Paul told the Corinthians that the marks of a true apostle were signs, wonders, and miracles. This is not to say that only apostles demonstrated these marks. We have indication of others who were not apostles who were also given these gifts (Stephen: Acts 6:8; Philip: Acts 8:13).

Jesus told us in John 10:38 that His miracles not only had a compassionate purpose behind them but also were intended to prove that He was from God:

But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.

The same was true for apostles. These individuals were anointed by God in such a way that they were able to perform great miracles. This was so that people would believe what they had to say. Paul reminded the Corinthians that although he did not dress the same as the false apostles in their assembly, he was a true apostle of God. The miracles and wonders that God did through him were signs from God of his genuine spiritual authority.

While in Corinth, Paul chose not to be a burden to the Corinthians, as the super-apostles were (verse 13). He spoke with sarcasm when he asked for forgiveness for not being a burden to them. The reality of the matter was that there were those in the Corinthian church who seemed to respect only those who were arrogant and demanding. The more these false teachers demanded, the more they got from the people. Because Paul did not take money from those he ministered to, they did not respect him as much as those who demanded large fees. Paul did nothing wrong here. He gave himself freely to the Corinthians, but this generosity only drew their criticism. What comes freely is not always appreciated.

In verse 14 Paul told the Corinthians that he was ready to come visit them for the third time. He would do nothing different this time. He would not demand money from them because he was not interested in their possessions but in the Corinthians themselves. His desire was to give to them and not take from them. He saw himself as their spiritual father, and, as a father, it was his responsibility to provide

for his children. Because of his fatherly love for the Corinthians, it was his great delight to give to them all he could. He would love and care for the Corinthians as his own children. To this end, he would gladly spend all he had for them.

Paul's motivation was beyond question. I have met individuals whose decision about whether they went to minister in a certain church or area was based on what they would get out of it for themselves. It was Paul's love that drove him to minister free of charge. This is not the type of life the world understands (verse 15).

In verse 16 Paul dealt with an issue that had come to his attention. There were those who did not trust him. They were saying that he had tricked them and was in some way deceiving them to get money. Paul ministered without taking advantage of anyone. He ministered without seeking anything in return.

This was very hard for people to understand. They believed that somehow he must be seeking something for himself. Why would anyone be so generous? Why would anyone minister consistently in such a way? No doubt, some thought that the collection by Titus for the poor saints in Jerusalem was a scheme to get money for himself.

Paul, knowing these questions were in the minds of the Corinthians, invited them to examine his ministry and the ministry of his co-workers. In verse 17 he asked them to examine whether he had ever taken advantage of them through any of his co-workers. He had sent Titus to them, and Titus was accompanied by an unnamed brother (verse 18). We are not sure who this individual was except that he was well known not only to Paul but also to the Corinthians.

Paul asked the Corinthians to remember the time that Titus was with them and examine his methods. Paul knew that he and Titus were united in spirit. He knew that his desire for the spiritual maturity of the Corinthians was the same as Titus's desire. Titus would not take advantage of the Corinthians either. He would minister with integrity among the Corinthians just as Paul did. Neither Paul nor his co-workers ever tried to deceive or abuse the Corinthians. This was in striking contrast to the style of the false apostles in Corinth.

In verse 19 Paul assured the Corinthians that what he had told them was true before God. He was ultimately accountable to God and not his human accusers. He was not ashamed of what he had told them about his apostolic authority (10:1–12:18). He also had the assurance that anyone who honestly examined his ministry would find that he served the Corinthians without hypocrisy.

What a powerful example Paul gives us here. How much of what we say have we been ashamed of? Could we stand before a holy God and let Him examine our words and motives? Could we stand before God and let Him examine the attitudes and intentions of our ministry? Have we been faithful in how we have ministered? Has everything been for the strengthening of the body of Christ?

In verse 20 Paul told the Corinthians that he feared that when he came to them, he would be humbled. This humbling would be in the form of seeing the Corinthians still in their sin. He feared that despite the way in which he had instructed them, they would still be living in turmoil and immorality. He was concerned that there would still be quarrels, jealousy, outbursts of anger, division, slander, gossip, pride, and disorder in their assembly. He was also afraid that he would be grieved to see that sexual sins had not

been confessed and cleansed from their midst. He addressed some of these sins in his first letter to the Corinthians (see 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 16:13–17). He was concerned that they had not matured in the Lord as they should have.

If the Corinthians had not listened to the apostle Paul, it was not because he had not tried. Sometimes even the best efforts we make will be unrewarded. Not everyone will accept our ministry however clean and pure our motives may be. The apostle gave himself fully to the work of the Lord, but he could not guarantee how people would respond. Everyone who hears our message must make a personal decision for themselves

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between how Paul ministered and how the false apostles ministered in Corinth?
- Do you find yourself struggling with self-centred motives in ministry? What are they? Explain.
- Can we guarantee results in ministry? Can we have the right motives and attitude and still not see results?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to examine your motives in ministry.

- Ask the Lord to guard your lips from speaking things that do not bring honour to his name.
- Ask the Lord to give you more of the attitude of Paul in ministry.



## AIM FOR PERFECTION

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Read 2 Corinthians 13

In writing this final chapter, Paul seems to have two main objectives. First, he wanted to remind the Corinthians that he was going to come to them, so they were to prepare for this by dealing with their sin. Second, he wanted to encourage the Corinthians to strive for perfection in their walk with the Lord.

Paul began in verse 1 by reminding the Corinthians that it was his intention to come to them for a third visit. Notice in this verse that he reminded the Corinthians that, in light of his coming, every matter needed to be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. When Paul said this, he was stating the truth of the law of God as recorded in Deuteronomy 19:15. In reminding the Corinthians of this, Paul seems to have been telling them that he was coming to judge. There were many issues that had not been dealt with in the church of Corinth, and Paul would come to correct this. He would search out the truth. He would seek out witnesses to the wrongs that were being done in the church and punish those who were living in sin, as the law of the Lord required.

There were many stories circulating in the church. Some of these stories were false. Others spoke of real sins that needed to be corrected. What church in our day does not suffer from these things? Paul was going to search out the truth in these matters on the basis of two or three witnesses and deal with these matters when he came.

On Paul's second visit with the Corinthians, he had challenged the church to seek out the truth and deal with the sinners in their midst. The church had not done this, and this grieved the apostle.

How often in our day have sins been ignored in the church? How often has our fear of people kept us from pursuing the glory of God? This is what was happening in Corinth. Paul challenged the Corinthians to do something about this. If they didn't deal with these matters, he told them that he was coming personally to discipline them himself. It grieved the heart of Paul to see the church in such a state of turmoil and immorality. For Paul, the glory of God was at stake. This church had hindered its own maturity by allowing these sins to go unchecked. This was unacceptable.

Certain people in Corinth had been questioning the authority of Paul. They were asking for proof that Christ was really speaking through him. They had accused Paul of being weak. This was in part because of the way he ministered. He did not minister like the false apostles of that day. He did not come in fancy clothes and with big words. He did not demand that the church pay him for his services. Instead, he was willing to offer his services freely. He worked with his hands to finance his ministry, not taking anything from the Corinthians. The Corinthians did not understand this.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul reminded the Corinthians of the power of the Lord Jesus and His saving work in them. He also reminded them that the Lord Jesus had been insulted and ridiculed, rejected and crucified. People turned their backs on Him. He lived a simple life, and sometimes He did not have a place to lay His head. He dressed like everyone else, and not in royal robes. He did not hesitate to identify with and touch the lowest person in society. As He hung on the cross, the world mocked Him for being weak, but He was being powerfully obedient to the Father's will. In a similar way, Paul appeared weak according to the ideas and standards of this world. But when he came to Corinth, everyone would see the power of God in him as he dealt in discipline with the offenders.

How easy it is to judge our leaders by the standards of this world. How easy it is to fall into the trap of believing that power and authority are demonstrated by what people wear, the amount of money they have, or the amount of respect they command. Jesus did not stand out in a crowd. He did not have money or possessions nor did people respect Him, yet He was the Son of God. His power was clothed in humility.

Authority is a very dangerous thing. Many people have been destroyed by it. Many have misused it and destroyed whole congregations of God's people. The only way we can handle authority is by carrying it in a pouch of humility. Only those who are truly humble can genuinely bear God's authority. This is how it was for Jesus and for Paul. They carried God's authority in a pouch of humility. If you want authority in ministry, ask God first to give you the humility to handle it. The church in Corinth failed to understand this concept.

In verse 5 Paul challenged the believers of Corinth to examine themselves to see if Christ was in them. If Christ lived in them, why was it so hard to believe that He could be living in Paul and speaking through him? In saying this, Paul challenged them to look beyond appearances. They had been looking at the wrong things. They saw the money and the fancy clothes of the false apostles and thought that these were men who deserved respect. Paul challenged them to look beyond the clothes to the heart. He challenged them to ask a question: Is the presence of Christ evident in this man? If so, then he was worthy of their respect.

Don't be fooled by the suit and tie. Don't be fooled by the fancy house and the fancy car. These are not the things that give authority. Only the presence of Christ gives divine authority. Those who carry the authority of Christ do so in pouches of humility.

Paul was hopeful that the Corinthians would look beyond the externals and see that the Lord Jesus was indeed evident in him. He didn't want them to listen to him because of the way he dressed or because he had money. He wanted them to be drawn to the presence of Christ which was evident in what he said.

Paul's hope and prayer was that the Corinthian church would do what was right (verse 7). It appears that in the first two visits, Paul had not seen the church of Corinth repent of these particular sins. He was hopeful that where he appeared to have failed in this matter, they would succeed. Evidence of Paul's humility can be seen in the fact that he did not feel compelled to be the one to bring about the change. How often we want to be the one who gets the credit and human praise for victory and conversions to Christ. While Paul did his part, it was not important that he

be the one to see the fruit. As long as the kingdom of God was being expanded, he was quite willing to step aside and let others bring in the harvest.

Notice in verse 8 that he did not want to fight against the truth but work for the truth. If he fought to be the one to bring in the harvest, he would be fighting the wrong battle. All too often, we can fight against the truth by striving for the glory ourselves. We want to have the honour of being the one to bring the final victory. We want our name to be associated with a particular success. In the battle for truth, however, we cannot afford to fight each other for recognition. This only hinders the advance of the kingdom.

Notice in verse 9 how Paul told the Corinthians that it did not matter to him if he and his co-workers seemed weak and the Corinthians seemed strong. If he found the Corinthians strong and living in the truth, he would be glad to remain weak and not exercise powerful discipline. All he wanted was to see the Corinthians strengthened in truth. Paul's concern was for the advance of truth, not for his own personal advancement.

What should it matter if another Bible-believing church in your city has more members than yours? Why should it matter if another pastor is seeing more conversions to Christ than you? What should it matter if people respond more to someone else's preaching than yours? What is important is that the kingdom of God be expanded. Our concern should not be to receive glory and recognition for ourselves, but to see God get the glory as His kingdom advances.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians to encourage them to deal with the problems in their assembly so that when he came

he would not have to deal with them (verse 10). He preferred to come to them with encouragement and blessing rather than having to use his authority to correct them harshly.

As his final challenge to the Corinthians, Paul told them to aim for perfection in their spiritual walk (verse 11). If they were to do this, they would have to listen to what he was telling them. They would have to be severe with sin and cut it off. They would also have to learn how to live at peace with each other and with Paul. All issues that separated and divided believers needed to be resolved.

The result of dealing with sin and restoring relationships would be that the God of peace would be with them. All too often, we want God to be with us in peace and power, but we do not want to deal with the things that keep us from experiencing this. We want Him to powerfully use us, but we don't want to deal with broken relationships. Paul challenged the church in Corinth first to strive for perfection by dealing with their sins and broken relationships. Only then could they expect to live in the peace of God.

In conclusion, Paul called the believers to greet each other with a holy kiss. This was a very special greeting reserved for those who were closest to them. Paul wanted to see a close relationship among believers. He reminded them that they were not alone in their endeavours to serve and honour the Lord. Other saints also sent their greetings. They were part of a large, worldwide body of Christ.

His prayer was that the grace (undeserved favour of Christ), the love of the Father, and the wonderful fellowship of the Holy Spirit would be theirs. It was this grace and love that was very patient with them in this time of spiritual struggle. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit was what would

keep them and empower them to live obediently as God was calling them to live. Paul committed them to this divine grace, love, and fellowship.

#### For Consideration:

- What was the difference between Paul's understanding of spiritual authority and that of the Corinthians and false apostles?
- What role does humility have in authority?
- Compare the attitude of Paul toward the sin in the church of Corinth with the attitude of the leaders of that church. What was the difference?
- What spiritual issues does your church need to deal with today? What about you personally?
- What does this chapter teach us about what needs to happen if we are to increasingly see the presence of God in our churches and in our personal lives?

#### For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you the areas of your life that need to be dealt with so that you can be drawn closer to Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you the same attitude of humility that Paul demonstrates in this chapter.

- Ask the Lord to give you Paul's attitude toward sin. Ask God to forgive you for the times you have chosen to live with sin rather than cut it off.





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