

Four Tires

Key Thought: Eternal comfort flows from the Father, through the Son, to you and I, who share it with others.

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 1:1-24 (Today's New International Version)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia:

² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

⁸ We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ¹¹ as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

¹² Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. ¹³ For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, ¹⁴ as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

¹⁵ Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. ¹⁶ I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. ¹⁷ Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my

plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both “Yes, yes” and “No, no”?

¹⁸ But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not “Yes” and “No.” ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us – by me and Silas and Timothy – was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.” ²⁰ For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. ²¹ Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, ²² set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

²³ I call God as my witness – and I stake my life on it – that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

Lesson Background

While my wife and I were in the dairy aisle of a grocery store we overheard a young girl (maybe three or four years old) ask “Mommy, can we get some pudding?” Mom replied, “No, not this time.” Little girl (big grin on face): “But *Santa* said it was okay for me to have some.” Scam artists come in all sizes, but Mom was tough: “I’m gonna have a talk with Santa.” End of pudding scam. Maybe end of Santa. YOU TRUTH: Have your children (or grandchildren) ever tried to hoodwink you to get something they wanted? Share your story. When you were growing up, did you ever try to hoodwink *your* elders? Explain.

One of the first things we learn is that we don’t always get what we want (even what we think we deserve). Early on life shows that it is not fair, and that theme pretty much continues for the duration. Sometimes, in fact, our existence can be downright hurtful. Problems, *big* problems, challenge us, perhaps even assaulting our faith, and we desperately search for answers and solutions. We just want some relief; we yearn to return to a position of relative comfort. How do we respond when life turns against us? Our lesson offers a bit of Spirit-driven advice on the whole matter of suffering, and how we might gain relief. From where does any lasting comfort against despair come? YOU TRUTH: What life obstacles do you find most difficult to bear? In what ways might these obstacles be turned into blessings?

Throughout the letter Paul seems to take a somewhat defensive position. He was faced with detractors in the church who questioned his apostolic credentials (“But you’re not one of the Twelve!”), and stirred up the church. Those who backed Paul were caught in the middle. Would the church endure, or fracture? Would Paul eventually convince the doubters of his

heavenly calling? In 1 Corinthians Paul addressed some of these issues, and the letter had done some good (2 Cor. 7:5-7). Still, he was concerned that the internal suffering caused by the differences of opinion, as well as outside pressures, would cause the church to collapse. Paul wanted the congregation to stand firm through it all, trusting in the God who gives comfort in times of suffering. YOU TRUTH: Have there ever been serious disagreements in your church family? How were those wounds healed? What about faith fractures in your own heart from doubt / discouragement / disillusionment? How was it healed?

Bible Learning

While returning from Florida recently we drove past a pickup truck stranded on the roadside. It was raised on a jack with the right rear tire missing. Two men were sitting under an overpass there, obviously waiting for help to arrive. The pickup bed had built-up wooden side panels, and it was filled almost to overflowing with tires. Now, assuming that the love and power of God overflow in our lives, and assuming that the fruit of the Spirit grows abundantly in our hearts, why do we so often find ourselves stranded along life's road, waiting for help, when help is already at hand? What spiritual "tires" are already set in place to carry us over the bumps, and onward down life's road? Let's look at four "tires" today. YOU TRUTH: Are you one who immediately takes steps to solve a problem, or do you tend to agonize before you act? Explain.

SPIRITUAL TIRE #1 (Verses 3-4, 8-11) God is the Father of compassion and comfort. God feels what we feel. When we are in pain, our heavenly Father suffers. So, for our Creator to gently caress our hearts with peace (comfort) is to also relieve some of *His* own shared concern for us. That truth expresses the vastness of God's love for *His* children. God hurts *with* us and feels relief *for* us. Many other verses in the Bible speak of God's expansive, actively concerned love: Exodus 33:14; Deuteronomy 31:8; 33:27; Psalm 16:8; 27:1, 3; 32:7-8; 34:4; 42:5, 8; Isaiah 30:15; 40:28-31; John 14:26; 1 Peter 5:7-10. YOU TRUTH: Looking again at verses 8-9, on what hope did Paul lean when despair weighed on him? How does this same hope affect your attitudes toward life and death? Have you yourself ever despaired of life? Share.

SPIRITUAL TIRE #2 (Verse 5) Christ's ability to endure excruciating pain (physical, emotional and spiritual) sets the standard for all of us as we face trials. Jesus, as our holy Mediator who has known what it's like to be human, makes intercession for our misdeeds. But what if he also makes intercession for us when we are suffering in some way? We are lonely, depressed, jobless, have a desperate illness, feel unfulfilled – whatever our

individual, unique pain, it seems obvious to me that the risen Jesus shares most intimately with the Father just how hurtful being mortal can be. Suffering unifies us on a universal, eternal level, as does shared comfort. YOU TRUTH: Have you ever asked Jesus to pray making intercession on your behalf? It's true that through Christ we can go directly to the Father, but wouldn't it be a comforting thought to have the One who has been here and done this, who has known both the worst life has to offer and the best our Creator has to offer, speak to God on our behalf? What do you think?

SPIRITUAL TIRE #3 (Verses 4, 6-7, 12-20) The support of others is immensely important to our being able to respond to crises in our lives. As I write this the country is mourning the lives lost (children and adults) at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. One thing we take from this, and other massive tragedies, is that people care. We care on a one-to-one level, sharing words of comfort and hope, as well as gathering together for corporate worship and support. We help each other work through such deep, nagging questions as, "Why!?" We pray with, we cope with, we hope with. And often words fail us and we simply sit with the brokenhearted, sharing sighs, hugs and tears. Paul lets the Corinthians know that his love for them had never weakened, that he shared with them the sufferings of Christ, as well as the comfort of the *risen* Lord. Death cannot keep its prey. When all manner of rescue in this mortal life finally fails, we always fall back on the promise of eternal life through our Savior, Jesus the Messiah. In the Christ we have hope for relief in this life *and* beyond this life. Both hope-threads are woven tightly together as we minister to one another in time of suffering. We cry together through the night, but rescue comes with the morning light. YOU TRUTH: What motivates us to help others work through the crises in their lives? What would our society be like if it got to the place where no one cared about anyone else?

SPIRITUAL TIRE #4 (Verses 21-23) Paul shares the reasons, despite his good intentions, why he couldn't make the visit to Corinth he'd planned. But he goes on to tell them that his change of plans might actually be to their benefit, because it would give them an opportunity to grow in faith. After all, as he wrote to them in an earlier letter, he was only one servant among many working in God's field (1 Cor. 3:1-21). Ultimately faith must be placed in God's mercy, not in the deeds of mankind. We come full circle: God is the Father of compassion and comfort. YOU TRUTH: In general, does our society find comfort more in God, or in *things*? If your answer was the latter, what things did you mean?

Bible Application

My wife and I were sitting at a theme park, waiting to watch fireworks, when a boy of nine or ten came over. He asked, “Can you see the fireworks from here?” My wife replied that you could, but that a large tree might hide some of them. The boy then asked, “Have you been here before?” “Yes, a few times,” my wife answered. “Have *you* ever been here before?” In a very matter of fact manner he said “No, this is my first time, and probably my last.” At this point his mother leaned around him and told my wife, “We’re here with [an organization that grants wishes to terminally ill children].”

And probably my last, he said, in pure bravery. No weapon in hand, no machismo. He simply quietly bore the inward wounds of a young man facing the enemy, death.

Our hearts were broken for him. As I absentmindedly watched the fireworks I noticed the moon overhead, shining full and bright through the clear night sky. While the boy and his family raced off to find some food (we never saw them again), I prayed that the Creator of that beautiful moon would shine a light into the boy’s heart and bring him peace. I prayed for God to comfort the child and his family through the war they were fighting. And I prayed for God to make (or keep) him strong in faith, to station caring loved ones at his side, and for him to trust in the living Savior and know the depth and richness of the Father’s pure and perfect love.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some things that we humans fear in this life? How does God help us to deal with each fear?
2. What do you suppose kept Paul from getting discouraged by his ministry to the Corinthian church? Can disunity within a church be a form of suffering? Why? What brings comfort in such situations?
3. How do you reply when a person blames God for the suffering in this world? Have you ever doubted God during troubling times? Share your experience.

Not Outwitted

Golden Text: “I have forgiven in the sight of Christ . . . in order that Satan might not outwit us.” (2 Cor. 2:10; NIV)

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 1:23–2:13 (NIV, 1984)

²³ I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. ^{2:1} So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. ² For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? ³ I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. ⁴ For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

⁵ If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent – not to put it too severely. ⁶ The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. ⁷ Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. ¹⁰ If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

¹² Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, ¹³ I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

Introduction

In the time since Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he had kept up on the situation there, and specifically told them “we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand” (1:13; unlike Peter’s thought in 2 Peter 3:15). He commended them (1:7), “our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort” [that is, being in the kingdom of God; compare NKJV / KJV, “partake of the consolation”]. Now Paul continued his instruction, admonition, and correction of the church he had helped Priscilla and Aquila

begin. (Review Acts 18, and 1 Corinthians, especially the first six chapters, before this lesson.)

Read 2 Corinthians 1:13–2:2

Paul had worked hard to aid the fellowship of believers toward salvation. He wanted to be able to “boast” of their faith “in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1:14), and he was confident that they had responded to his teaching (which includes loving one another as much as they loved God; 1 Cor. 13; 15:58). The great diversity of the church in Corinth and the area around it included their ethnic backgrounds and their spirituality. Many were “carnal” and living according to their human reasoning (1 Cor. 2, 3), “with worldly [fleshly] wisdom” (1:12). Some were “spiritually minded” and had “the mind of Christ”. Therefore even when Paul wrote simply and with easy words he still said some “have understood us in part”. But Paul encouraged even these who did not fully comprehend him, “you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1:14).

Read 2 Corinthians 2:3-11

Even for grievous sins Paul did not intend people to be rejected and removed from the body. That was not the idea behind writing “deliver such an one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.” Rather Paul gave the church a way to show love to a believer whose actions were not approved of God, not advising a harsh response but expecting the situation to result in forgiveness and reconciliation.

Paul wrote, “I determined . . . that I would not come to you in sorrow” (compare 1 Cor. 4:21). He let them work the love of God among themselves, “having confidence” in them to fulfill his “joy”, the salvation of this sinner by his repentance. Paul had admonished the church with personal “anguish” (great inner turmoil) and “tears”. He wanted them all to “know the depth of [his] love” for them. Both Paul and the church had “grieved” over the public display of sin.

Paul referenced the command to Israel to clean out the leaven before eating the Passover, and related that to having nothing to do with the sinful person, even to the extent of not sharing a meal with him: “with such a man do not even eat” (1 Cor. 5:7, 11). Some translations refer to the action of the Corinthians as “punishment”, but this description is too harsh. Paul used a Greek word (*epitimia*) which may also convey the milder meaning “admonishment” (Thayer’s lexicon). That reflects Paul’s statements about “sorrow” and “love” among brethren and puts the matter in the light of personal concern for a believer’s welfare as he is expected to bear his burden through to repentance. This parallels Paul’s advice to the church in

Thessalonica (a few miles north of Corinth) “do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:15).

2:7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him.

2:7 so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow

2:8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love to him.

Paul had already “forgiven”. Here Paul used the Greek word *charisasthai*, not the usual word for forgiveness. It means “to do something pleasant or agreeable (to one), to do a favor, to gratify” (Thayer’s lexicon). Paul meant more than for them to “forgive and forget” (as the saying goes). The word describes a loving action toward the one who sinned, sought repentance from God, and turned his life to righteous living. The word is related to *charis* which Paul used to describe God’s grace for all believers, since we all have sinned (consider 2 Cor. 4:13-15). And they were not only to forgive, but to do acts of kindness and show favor toward this one. Simply, they were told “reaffirm your love for him”. In Matthew 18, addressing all conflict situations, Jesus used the usual Greek word for forgiveness and added a parallel thought about relationships between believers in the negative: “if you from your heart forgive not” the Father will not forgive you (v. 35). He also said we are to ask God, positively, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”. We often take personal offense when someone sins against God (like Samuel did when Israel wanted a king). But there is an obligation on us to act righteously when someone turns to God and overcomes sin. We should rejoice, and we should show even more of the love we are obliged to show while that person struggled with sin.

Paul also mentioned “comfort” (2:7), the same word he used to describe God at the beginning of this letter, “Blessed be the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, Who comforts us in all our tribulations” (1:3-4, NKJV). This word translated “comfort” (*parakalesai*) means “to call to one’s side, call for, summon him near to you” and by extension “to console, to encourage and strengthen” (Thayer’s lexicon). God draws us to Him “so that we can comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves received from God” (1:4). Paul used the same word several more times in 1:5-7. Like the Corinthian faithful, we are obligated to be like God, showing mercy and comfort to those who fall into all kinds of afflictions, including some which involve stumbling and sin. We are always to give other believers the opportunity to show God’s mercy, comfort, and love.

2:11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

The NKJV and KJV translate this, “lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.” God’s adversary, “that old Serpent” (because he tempted and deceived Eve) is also “the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night” (Rev. 12:10). He accused God of protecting Job. Most often he works like he did with Eve, by deception, half truths and lies. Jesus outwitted Satan by living by “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Jesus addressed how Satan worked within the Jewish community leaders to kill him, and by the leaders deceived the people to seek his death (John 8:42-47; 19:1-15; Gen. 3:15). Paul described the power behind the “man of sin” as the work of Satan, “with all power and lying wonders” (2 Thess. 2). The “beasts” of Revelation 13 received their power from Satan. Satan is “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who works in the children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1-3). Jesus gave Paul the responsibility to preach to the Gentiles, “to open their eyes, and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” [Jesus] (Acts 26:18). Paul later explained to the Corinthians (11:14), “Satan himself masquerades as an angel [messenger] of light.” Knowing this we can understand why Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 about keeping ourselves separate from error and the worship of gods who are not the true “living” God. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers . . . What harmony is there between Christ and Belial [a reference to Satan]?” We need to be aware of Satan and how he works in people to deceive, especially by false teachings about Jesus, the son of the living God. (Compare Matthew 16:15-20 with 1 John 2:18-29; 4:1-10.)

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12-13

Now Paul goes on to the work of God, preaching the gospel of Christ to others. Paul applies the work of love which he and the church at Corinth were obligated to practice among themselves. The church of Corinth had met the challenge and been strengthened in their faith. They lived the gospel of Christ before their community. Paul encouraged the church to direct their efforts outward, to “those who are perishing” (2:15). Whatever the problems and difficult relationships which may occur between believers and within a congregation, God expects us first to show love among ourselves, then to all the world around us, even approving others to go and proclaim the gospel around the world. As with Paul, “the Lord has opened a door” for us, if we are looking to do His will. The work at home will be there as the church

turns its focus from itself to others, and shows the love which God has taught us by the rule of Christ, “Love your neighbor as yourself” as well as “love the Lord your God.” This we will do, with all our heart and all our strength. “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in him” (2:14). In the following chapters (3-6) Paul details the ministry of the believers at Corinth, even the “message of reconciliation” which is “not counting men’s sins against them” (5:17-21).

Questions for Discussion

1. Consider how longsuffering and bearing others’ burdens relate to comforting and forgiving as described above (see Gal. 5:22–6:10).
2. List the “devices” of Satan and how he works (you might consider 1 Peter 5:8; Matthew 4:1-11; Hebrews 2:14; Ephesians 6:11-12; and 2 Corinthians 11:12-15).
3. What are your church’s plans for proclaiming God’s word, telling His message outside of the building where you meet?
4. How do you support teachers / evangelists who give their time to travel?
5. What is the message that Paul preached? What was “the gospel of Christ” which Paul preached at Corinth and throughout Macedonia (Acts 16-19)?

God's Commendation

Golden Text: "You are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (2 Cor. 3:3)

Key Thought: God gets all the credit for His salvation message, its means of communication, and its heart-changing results.

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 2:14–3:6 (NASB)

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. ¹⁵ For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶ to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

^{3:1} Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? ² You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; ³ being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴ Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, ⁶ who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Introduction

As a way of introducing ourselves to compete for a job we may submit a resume, a brief summary of our qualifications, work history, and accomplishments. We could also offer a statement of why we believe we are best qualified for the position. In the past, letters of commendation were important as independent recommendations to the hiring authority about the candidate being qualified for the job on offer. The value of such letters depended solely on the veracity of the author.

In today's lesson, Paul finds himself having to defend his authenticity as a teacher of good news truth. How he presents his case is a good lesson to us

on how we too can authenticate ourselves and our church leaders as teachers and defenders of the true good news message.

Bible Learning

Paul has just encouraged the Corinthian church to cease the discipline of a former member who had repented and changed his ways from sin. He should be urged to return to fellowship and be welcomed back as a brother in Christ. This is, after all, the purpose of the church.

Now Paul turns his attention to another issue brewing in the fellowship, a potential undermining of all the work Paul has done there. It appears a number of Jewish leaders, likely having taken up some Christian ideas but still advocating maintaining Jewish ones, have come into the congregation and challenged Paul's right to teach the gospel as he did to Gentiles. These opponents appear to have come before the Corinthians with letters of commendation which purport to authenticate their worthiness to take over leadership. Paul has obtained news of this challenge and here begins to respond to it.

Paul begins cautiously, prudently, and exultantly. **But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ.** Here Paul uses the portrayal of a conquering Roman general leading his victorious troops into the city in triumphal procession with all his captives and spoils of war following in his train. He gives God the ultimate credit for the triumph accomplished by Christ's leadership ministry over his servants who have actually been in the field of conflict. Paul here is the general, Christ his ruler and God is the sovereign over all. God is the one who authorized calling Paul into service (Gal. 1:11-16). He knew his capabilities. Christ was sent to call him into service and maintained his position of Lord over him (Acts 9:4-6). And Paul willingly went out into the battle as he was commanded. In many places he brought victory over sin and death to those who heard and embraced his gospel message. Though Paul's proclamation of the gospel brought victory to the believers, it was ultimately to God's credit that the victory could come at all.

Paul adds the following: **And manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.** "The imagery comes from the strong, sweet smell of incense from censers in the Triumph parade, which, along with the fragrance of crushed flowers strewn under horses' hooves, produced a powerful aroma that filled the city" (*The MacArthur Study Bible*, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006, p. 1734). God is the ultimate reason for the "sweet aroma of the knowledge of God", "a fragrance of Christ". It is He who originated the salvation that

has come to the Corinthian brethren. The sweet smells of His grace pungently fill the air believers breathe. Both the saved and those perishing sense the powerful effects of this grace. **To the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.** There is no other result to be expected. Both those saved and those perishing know their destiny. Eternal death awaits those who reject the message while life immortal is the gift to those who believe. These are the net results people can expect from positively or negatively responding to the gospel message.

Having reviewed the general nature and outcome of his gospel message Paul now turns directly to the prickly issue at hand. He begins by asking: **who is adequate for these things?** Who can authoritatively say they bear the absolute truth of the gospel message God is declaring through the life, ministry, and sacrifice of His Son Jesus? Whoever it is must obtain their credentials from the author of the message. At this point Paul begins to point at those who have challenged his authority to preach the gospel. His first charge concerns the motive for preaching. He declares, **For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.** These challengers may well have been Judaizers (Acts 15:1) who plagued Paul wherever he established a church. They may have obtained letters of commendation from fellow Jewish leaders, or even obtained them under false pretenses from church leaders in Jerusalem. At any rate it seems they wanted to take control of the Corinthian church and expected to be reimbursed for providing the privilege of their direction. Paul's response is that he obtained his ministry, his call to service, directly from Christ by authority from God. This is the story of his conversion he told repeatedly.

Secondly, Paul asks, **Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?** Paul wants to know whether letters are all the Corinthians would accept from him to show the authoritative voice of his ministry. He gave them something better to consider on the authenticity of his ministry. **You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.** It's as if Paul is saying, "What more commendation do you need? The very change you are experiencing in your own lives should tell you the authenticity of the message I bore to you. It is the evidence within yourselves that you need for authenticity."

Paul notes that this confidence did not originate within himself. Rather, it originates with God, through His Son. **Such confidence we have through Christ toward God.** Paul elaborates on this idea, saying, **Not that we are**

adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant. This was all God’s doing, which they should know is true by looking at their own lives and the changes that had resulted from hearing and responding to the good news message. Such changes can only occur if the One who gave your life knows what you need to overcome the sin problem within you. God knows the problem, and He knows and has implemented the solution, letting our lives reflect the benefits of the new covenant which is having its affect within us.

The leaders who opposed Paul were offering a return to the old covenant that kept people bound in the chains of sin. We can’t totally keep the Law, it can only teach that people need something better. And that better thing is what Paul taught about Christ. His readers knew full well that salvation is found **not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.** The letter of the Law is lethal to our spiritual lives, but God’s Spirit of Truth brings healing to burdened hearts. They needed to believe what their hearts were telling them.

Bible Application

Paul’s problem was the need to defend the authenticity of his gospel message. Some of the Corinthians had begun to doubt his authority based on charges brought against him by his constant adversaries. He used three distinct ideas to combat their charges. 1) He said his message was not his own but came directly from God (2:14–3:4). 2) The Corinthians’ changed lives evidenced the truth and effectiveness of what he preached (3:5). 3) God gave him this ministry to do; he did not take it upon himself (3:6).

How can we see these three points helping to authenticate the gospel message we teach? Certainly we have no problem showing that the message did not originate with us, it came from the Bible which has been in existence for nearly two millennia. More importantly, it comes from God. Also, we are not the originators of how the work would propagate through preaching or teaching the message. God chose the method of distributing the message, too. But unless we see ourselves, in some capacity, participating in the work of ministry we will never help the third point become reality, helping people’s lives be changed because they respond to the message. Jesus gave the command, “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:20). In some way we must individually see ourselves as valuably contributing to the work of discipleship, directly or indirectly. Not all of the body’s many members do the same work. But all do work that contributes to the health and wholesomeness of the body. We need to be willing to discover what we can contribute to this work.

Life Response

As believers in the good news message of Jesus we must believe the message is God-originated. We must also believe it changes lives and that we ourselves should have experienced this reality in our own lives. But what about contributing to the work of discipling new believers in Jesus? How can we contribute to doing that? One way is to remind ourselves that the church is like a human body. Jesus is the head and the members are the various parts of the body (see 1 Corinthians 12:1-31). Not everyone is expected to do the same thing. But all of us are expected to do something to help contribute to the overall health of the body of believers and that includes helping to bring new believers into the body.

Name some things that are needed tasks in the church to help maintain its functionality. Keep in mind not only spiritual things, but physical, material, social, and personal things. Think of other areas, be as broad minded in your thinking as possible. Capture all of this in categories on a chart. Have all class members review the list. They should consider not only what things they are each individually doing, but things on the list that they could consider doing to help advance the cause of discipling others.

Questions for Discussion

1. What have been some effective ways in which you have applied for a new job?
2. How does Paul respond to the Corinthians about what he considers to be his letter of commendation?
3. How does Paul's image of a human body (1 Cor. 12:12-21) help us see how we individually can contribute to the work of helping people learn and have opportunity to respond to the good news message?
4. What can you do in service in the church to help the church achieve its appointed work to disciple believers?

Transformation from Glory to Glory

Golden Text: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Key Thought: The new covenant gives us liberty to live faithfully for God without fear of condemnation for not fully measuring up to God’s Law.

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6 (NASB)

⁷ But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading *as* it was, ⁸ how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? ⁹ For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. ¹⁰ For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses *it*. ¹¹ For if that which fades away *was* with glory, much more that which remains *is* in glory.

¹² Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in *our* speech, ¹³ and *are* not like Moses, *who* used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. ¹⁴ But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. ¹⁵ But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; ¹⁶ but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is liberty. ¹⁸ But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

^{4:1} Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, ² but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴ in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has

shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Introduction

In the verses preceding our text Paul defends the legitimacy of his ministry by its results with the Corinthians. He says to them, “You are a letter of Christ . . . written with the Spirit of the living God . . . on tablets of human hearts.” He warns that should they resubmit to the need to completely obey God’s Law it will crush the life which has been renewed in them, “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”. Listening to those who claim to represent Moses and the Law of God will lose them all they gained by coming to know Jesus and what he has done for them. At this point Paul begins to point out how much better the liberating ministry of righteousness is than the ministry of death written “in letters engraved on stones”. He wants them to be free to live a spiritually rich, fulfilling and abundant life in Christ. In effect a return to Law works would spiritually kill them. Paul is seeking to help them avoid that calamity for their spiritual lives.

Bible Learning

Paul wants the Corinthians to realize how much they would lose by returning to being Law keepers. He seeks to illuminate the distinct difference between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ (Rom. 8:2). In particular he compares the fading glory of the shine on Moses’ face with the increasing glory that surrounds the life, ministry, and work of Jesus. In other writings Paul contrasts the enslavement of the Law of God binding our hearts to sin and death to the freedom and spiritual enrichment we obtain through the reconciling work achieved by Jesus Christ. Paul’s words for the Corinthians are also for our hearing, guiding our full understanding of the spiritual treasure Jesus brought to us on the cross.

See below how Paul compares the ministry of death (the old covenant) with the ministry of the Spirit (the new covenant):

The Old Covenant (v. 14)
the ministry of death
letters engraved on stones
the ministry of condemnation
came with glory
has glory
what had glory . . . has no glory
that which fades away
was with glory

The New Covenant (Luke 22:20)
the ministry of the Spirit
God has shone in our hearts (4:6)
the ministry of righteousness
came even more with glory
abounds in glory
the glory that surpasses it
much more that which remains
is in glory

Paul makes the point that the Mosaic Law came to bring visibility and pronouncement of sin and death to all men. The purpose of this Law was not to save mankind from sin and death but to educate him (Gal. 3:24-25) to realize something more was needed than could be derived from it. Indeed, the Law **came with glory** as evidenced in the glowing face of Moses as he appeared to the people after being in the presence of the Lawgiver (Exod. 34:29-35). “The sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face.” That sight must have been both amazing and terrifying, leading to Moses wearing a veil to cover the glory except when he spoke to God in His presence.

Exodus says nothing about the glory fading from Moses’ face over time, but Paul does. In 3:7 he comments about **the glory of his face** and implies it was not permanent, **fading as it was**. Several of his expressions imply that the image on Moses’ face gradually lost its glory: **came with glory, has glory, what had glory . . . has no glory, that which fades away was with glory**. The old covenant had a definite purpose, but it was not effective for renewing the life of someone who realized they could never live up to its rigid standards.

By contrast Paul refers to the new covenant glory by these phrases: **came even more with glory, abound in glory, glory that surpasses it, much more that which remains is in glory**. The glory of the new covenant will not only last but increases. It brings life, renewal and hope to its beneficiaries in contrast to death, decay, and discouragement to those who trust in keeping the Law for salvation.

Paul refers to Moses’s veil to get at how Law works cause a blindness for those who depend on the Law to find satisfaction in life. That can only be lifted by understanding and accepting the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for their sins. Only then can **the Spirit of the Lord** bring true **liberty** to the burdened heart of the sinner. That is the aim of God – to transform our hearts. When He lifts the veil we can begin to see **as in a mirror the glory of the Lord**. That’s when the true transformation of our moral lives can begin to take place. God is Spirit, the true spirit of the fully enriched life. And when we can see Him for who He really is then our lives can become more and more like His, changing step by step into His **same image from glory to glory**. Paul helps the Corinthians recall that this is now their heritage, so they ought to cling to it. They must reject the call of certain leaders to leave Jesus behind. Rejecting Jesus will only result in their being dragged back into dependence on keeping the Law in order to be justified in God’s sight. This is life-threatening to one’s spiritual life, which can only fade more and more if one is choosing to depend on the Law.

At this point Paul returns to the power and effectiveness of his own ministry of righteousness found in Jesus. He seeks to openly declare the truth as he has been taught it. In contrast the Law keepers tried to veil their teachings by using words that sound like Paul's but with different content. He says, **we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.** Paul's good news is truth and is made clear by putting it into practice.

To those who choose not to believe it their unbelief is a veil over their own minds and hearts. Paul says, **the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.** They cannot see the glory of Christ because they reject the true **image of God.** Rather, they choose to follow an image they have created for themselves. They will perish in that belief, having rejected both the **light that shall shine out of darkness** and the God who prophesied of this light. They cannot see **the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God** for the veil of spiritual blindness remains on their minds and hearts. They reject this glory that can only be found in its entirety **in the face of Christ.**

Bible Application

The fullness of life as God has ordered it to be within us can only be achieved by putting our lives into harmony with the life of God. We might think that the fullness of life can be found in good jobs, earning high wages, generating substantial retirement savings, enjoying all the savory things this life has to offer. But if we pursue this with all earnestness we miss the spiritual life God wants us to find. By dedicating ourselves to achieving the things of interest found in this world we can easily be convinced that if we just live life "good enough" God will accept us into His kingdom. But living "good enough" is merely another veil that hides the truth about how we must live. The true spiritual life is not a matter of observing what is "good" in the lives of others and copying it. It isn't even about living a step or two "higher," as we might perceive that. Rather the true spiritual life comes by knowing what that life looks like in the lives of Yahweh God and His Son Jesus. When we do that, then we can begin to understand what pleases God, and what will yield the rich spiritual life God has in store for us.

Life Response

Paul said, "We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory."

He is inferring that we who believe in the sacrificial work of Jesus are now engaged in reordering our lives because we have removed the veil that blinded our spiritual understanding of how we must now live. Knowing this is where we now stand, what will you do to look into the mirror that reflects the glory of God? And how will you make God's image your own from glory to glory? This is the true life every believer is challenged to live in this age. This is not a burdensome life but a burden-freeing life. How would you explain this idea to an unbeliever?

Questions for Discussion

1. What is it about the letter of the Law that kills, compared to the life-giving nature of the New Covenant?
2. Why does Paul use the phrases "letters engraved on stones" and "the ministry of condemnation" to refer to the Old Covenant? Why does he call it "the ministry of condemnation"?
3. What does Paul mean when he says that in the New Covenant "God has shone in our hearts" and calls it "the ministry of righteousness"?
4. Why must we understand the way Yahweh God and His Son Jesus live their lives in order to find fulfillment in the spiritual life God promises us?
5. Knowing where we stand in relation to God, what will you do to begin looking into the mirror that reflects the glory of God? And how will you go about making God's image your own from glory to glory?

Looking for What is Unseen

Golden Text: “For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven” (2 Cor. 5:2)

Key Thought: Paul invites his readers to share in his desire for the promised resurrection body which will be free from all of our imperfections and present troubles.

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 4:7–5:10 (NASB)

⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; ⁸ *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death works in us, but life in you.

¹³ But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE,” we also believe, therefore we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. ¹⁵ For all things *are* for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

^{5:1} For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For indeed in this *house* we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, ³ inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. ⁴ For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.

⁶ Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord – ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight – ⁸ we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. ⁹ Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Introduction

Society often paints a picture of our lives which does not line up with the hope shared by Jesus and the many early Christians. In action movies, hit dramas on television, or video games, we are often told there is no hope if the main character dies. When Mario runs out of lives, it is game over.

Unfortunately many Christians today, even those who profess faith and hope in the return of Jesus to raise the dead, nevertheless consider death in rather that way. The thought of being united with God and Jesus at their next moment of consciousness, at the resurrection, does not seem like a better alternative to living in this age. Other times only lip service is given to the hope of the resurrection, as if it were merely a doctrine that needs to be checked off a list of things to adhere to in order to maintain membership in one's local church. Whatever the case may be, Paul seeks to change our thinking and hopes so that we embrace the promise of this new body which was given to Jesus 2000 years ago and will be granted to believers who remain faithful to godly living.

Bible Learning

Before jumping into a verse-by-verse look at this important passage, we need to place it in context. 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 talks about the privilege that Paul has in the ministry entrusted to him. Specifically, it is the word of God (v. 2), that is the gospel (v. 3-4) which Paul has been commissioned to preach. It is not a message that places the focus on Paul or any other preacher, but rather on Christ. It is important to keep in mind where Paul is placing the emphasis in his discussion thus far: Paul is but a mere servant of the glorious gospel message.

With the context fresh in mind we can now turn to the passage at hand. Verse seven speaks of this entrusted gospel as a treasure held in an earthen vessel. Earthenware was a material in the ancient Near East which was known for its frailty and tendency to break easily. It was made out of clay right from the ground. It would seem that Paul is contrasting the greatness of the gospel with the weakness of himself as a servant. He does this, as the

passage goes on to say, so that the greatness of the power will be given to God and not to the servant. Paul is speaking in a way that encourages humility among those who preach the gospel. It is important to remember that the treasure spoken of here is the gospel, not some supposed immortal soul trapped in an earthenware body.

Verses 8-10 speak of the suffering that Paul continues to endure for the sake of Christ and his gospel message. Some in the Corinthian community argued that apostles held an exalted role in the church which gave them immunity to persecution. On the contrary, Paul argues that his ethic of imitating Christ validates his claim to apostleship. He states in various ways that his embodying of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ gives real meaning and purpose to his ministry. For Paul, the gospel was not just a belief. It was something that gave him the motivation for his ministry and life.

Verses 11-14 talk about how Paul and his company are constantly being handed over to death for the sake of Jesus. This participle of the verb denotes a constant action, revealing Paul's commitment in his emulation of the death of Jesus in his obedience to the demands of the gospel. He does this in order that the life of Jesus might be displayed for others to see. Verse twelve indicates that this life is intended to provide life-like motivation for his readers. He then goes on to quote Psalm 116:10, a psalm about how God delivers the servant from death and the obedience that follows in gratitude from that redemption. Paul uses this verse to say that God will bring about the final rescue in the form of resurrection (which he will speak of at the end of the sentence) which therefore should result in motivation preaching of the gospel. Verse fourteen establishes a very important truth to grasp hold of. Paul and his friends know and are convinced of the fact that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will likewise raise us from the dead. The extremely important preposition "with" is used twice in this verse. One could ask, "When will we be *with Jesus*?" According to this verse, it will be at the resurrection (and not at the moment of death). Paul here is going to introduce a contrast between the resurrection-life promised in the future and the fragile life we live now. It is important to keep this contrast in mind, that of a present body and a promised future resurrected body, and not to confuse this contrast with the often supposed "body-soul" concept.

Paul goes on to say that his ministry is done with the Corinthians in mind. The gospel which is spreading should bring glory to God, which is indeed a good thing. In light of this aim, Paul does not lose heart nor get discouraged, even though his body is constantly under attack, getting older, losing hair and fingernails, etc. On the contrary, 4:16 says that our inner self/man is being renewed day by day. There is nothing in the argument thus

far which would warrant an interpretation regarding a soul inside of Paul's body. Rather, this is our new life/identity in Christ, noting that the word translated "being renewed", *anakainoutai*, only occurs one other place (Col. 3:10), in which the same theme of transformative living in the present is spoken of.

4:17 talks of the expectation of an eternal weight of glory. The word "eternal" denotes an adjectival state having to do with the age to come (not what happens when we die). The glory which we are awaiting is described elsewhere by Paul in Romans 8:18 "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Again, the emphasis on the concept of glory is a future thing, not something to be attained upon death. 4:18 again speaks of the expectation of the unseen eternal things, carrying again the concept of a future-oriented perspective/hope. This is looking forward to the age to come, as the word "eternal" again designates.

5:1 continues the line of thinking with the opening word "for". We know that if our earthly body dies we have another body, eternal, in the heavens. As with other things currently stored in heaven, we don't go there to get it, rather it comes out of heaven to us. It is rather interesting to note that our body reserved in heaven is spoken of in the present, as something we currently have. Often times in Jewish literature the writer will speak in the present tense of a promise in prospect (cf. Matt. 6:1-2, 5, 16; John 17:5 for New Testament examples).

5:2 and 4 say that we *groan* for this new body. Paul here uses an extremely rare verb (*stevazomen*). It is only used one other time by Paul, in Romans 8:23 "And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body". It would seem that Paul reserves this rare groaning verb to describe his longing for the redemption of the body upon resurrection, not at death. 5:2 also states that we long to be clothed with our body from heaven. This is extremely important to highlight due to the confusion regarding death and resurrection. It would seem that Paul does not expect a disembodied, unclothed state. Remember that in 1 Corinthians 15:53 Paul says that "this perishable must *put on* the imperishable, and this mortal must *put on* immortality". This is what Paul says also in 5:4, which declares that we do not want to be unclothed. Is Paul battling an erroneous doctrine in the air saying that we have an immortal soul that leaves the body? He argues that we do not want to be disembodied, but rather clothed with our promised resurrection body.

Therefore, to be absent from this body (5:8) will be *at the moment we are with the Lord*, occurring at the resurrection (as described in the preposition

“with” in 4:14). This makes further sense with the talk in 5:10 of the gathering of believers at the judgment seat of Christ, which happens not at death but, again, at the resurrection.

Bible Application

Paul was attempting in this passage to accomplish quite a few things with his Corinthian readers. First of all, he was trying to contrast the value and privilege of being a preacher of the glorious gospel with his own weaknesses, which were characterized by beatings, lashings, and persecutions. Paul also wants to allow his life of emulating the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus to be a catalyst for his readers to allow the resurrection life of Jesus to motivate their Christian living. Paul reminded his converts that the resurrection of Jesus is the pattern for the resurrection promised to faithful believers. He then goes on to argue that the glorious resurrection body, which is currently reserved in heaven, will engulf our weaknesses. Paul has a strong desire to receive this immortal body and at that time be united with the Lord Jesus. From this his application is that we desire to be pleasing to Jesus, for one day we will all stand before him on the Day of Judgment to give an account for our lives.

For Christians in our world today we need to take seriously this mighty apostle who was commissioned by Jesus Christ. If Paul sought to imitate the life of Jesus and not merely believe it as a propositional truth, then we should meditate on how we can do the same. If Paul sought to embrace the role as a servant of the gospel, then we should strive to be obedient to this privileged call. If Paul did not want to be unclothed, then we should not seek or embrace a faith of unclothed bodies and disembodied souls. If Paul sought after the resurrection, then we should not consider death to be “game over” for us, as the rest of society would have us believe. If we will one day have to give an account to Jesus on the Day of Judgment then we should watch our lives closely and strive to live for God more fully and with more zeal.

Life Response

One of the aims of Christians today is to spread the hope of the resurrection of Jesus. Not only does it prove that he was the Son of God and the Messiah, it also promises us that we too will be raised from the dead if we remain faithful to God. Unfortunately many do not see the coming resurrection as the source of their hope. We have a mission of bringing hope and faith where there is neither, just as Paul did for his converts. While others may seek to place their comfort in a heavenly afterlife we can offer a better hope, the hope embraced by both Jesus and Paul.

2 Corinthians 5:10 should be meditated on often. When I read it I emphasize the “all” in the verse, for everyone will stand before Jesus to give an account for the life lived. Paul included himself in that. That means everyone, Abraham, Moses, David, Josiah, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Timothy, Abe Lincoln, Tim Tebow, and even you. When I take a class in college or grad school I note when the tests are coming up. I prepare accordingly, because I want the outcome to be favorable with a positive grade. We will be assessed on our works as Christians, not just on our inner faith, when Jesus returns. How will you prepare for this test? How will you encourage others to help?

Questions for Discussion

1. It is common for believers of our persuasion to argue that 2 Corinthians 5:8 does not mean what most report it to mean, about being absent from the body and thus present as a disembodied soul in the heavenly presence of Jesus. Instead of arguing what this passage does *not* mean, can we reasonably articulate to others what it instead *does* mean? Are there parts of the passage that seem difficult to understand?
2. Some translations make textual variant choices that obscure the meaning of this difficult passage. If someone in the group has a NRSV, have them read 2 Corinthians 5:3 and compare it with other translations. What is the difference and why is it significant? (It is the opinion of this author that the NASB chose the better textual variant based on critical choices.)
3. Why is it significant for believers to hold strongly to Paul’s desire to “not want to be unclothed, but clothed”?
4. Are we comfortable admitting to ourselves that we will indeed be judged according to our Christian works, as 5:10 indicates?

No Longer Live For Self

Golden Text: “He [Jesus] died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.” (2 Cor. 5:15)

Key Thought: Our zeal to serve God springs from His labor of love for us, and our gratitude to Him for granting us the gift of immortality.

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 (NASB)

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. ¹² We are not again commending ourselves to you but *are* giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have *an answer* for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; ¹⁵ and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.

¹⁶ Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him in this way* no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. ¹⁸ Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹ namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Introduction

Earlier in this chapter Paul reflected on his hope of resurrection and being in the presence of Christ. That was his ultimate hope in life and why he labored so industriously for Jesus. That is why he wrote to the Corinthians, “Therefore we also have as our ambition . . . to be pleasing to Him.” For he knew and taught that “we must all appear before the judgment

seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” To Paul life was not meant to be a pleasure ride, but a trial, a testing, a refining in the fires of daily living. It is God’s intent to put all believers under the light of His ways to judge how we have lived in order to recompense, that is, reward or chastise, the things we do in this life. We won’t be judged for our fitness to be in God’s kingdom, but in order to reward our faithfulness to Him as we live out our lives in our mortal state. The “good” things we do will have lasting consequences during our lives in God’s kingdom. The “bad” things we do will be wasted efforts resulting in disappointment in the lack of any rewards. That may not sound so bad this side of the eternal kingdom, but once in the kingdom the lack of such rewards may prove to be most disheartening. And who wants to be disappointed or disheartened as they enter the eternal age? These thoughts are prelude to and underlay what Paul teaches in our lesson text. Certainly Paul has made up his mind he is not about to be disappointed about his enjoying living forever. He has made his decision to do what he has been called upon to do. And he urges us to do the same.

Bible Learning

Paul opens by reflecting again on his ministry of reconciliation to the Corinthians. This is the work he received directly from Jesus and he always remained faithful in it. **Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men**, he writes. Paul obeyed his call because he feared the one who called him. He no longer lived for himself but for his master. He fully believed that he was doing precisely what he was called to do. God knew and saw all that he did and so he said, **we are made manifest to God**. In like manner the Corinthians saw all that Paul did and as a result he says, **I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences**. This he wrote to help the Corinthians be assured that his message was truth.

Paul’s battle with leaders of a Law-keepers faction in Corinth made him continue reminding the believers of the reasons to ignore them and persist in following his teachings. The antagonists called Paul crazy. But Paul insisted that if that was so, **if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you**. So Paul’s every inclination and devotion was to persist in proclaiming the good news message as it had been delivered to him. Thus for good reason he said **For the love of Christ controls us**. Paul resisted the urge to follow any different path. To him there was no other path to follow.

And what was this mighty message that controlled Paul’s ministry? He says he **concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He**

died for all. Who was this who died for all? None other than Jesus, God's own Son, the one who called Paul to his work of service. And why does Paul say Jesus died for all? **So that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.** Here Paul returns to the underlying theme of judgment with which he began this section, or more specifically the reason to be ready for the judgment and facing a positive outcome. He counsels the believers to no longer live for themselves. That is, after all, the natural thing to do. But Paul is calling us all out of the world to die to self. For **all died** to self who acknowledged that Jesus died for them. They now see the greater need to live for him who died for them. Jesus lived and died for them that they might live and never die. So what is the obvious response they should make toward Jesus? Paul says they must live for him. To live for Jesus is to be very conscious of focusing one's attention on what God wants them to do during any activity in which they are engaged.

We always have an attitude when we are involved in an activity. But it is important to God to have the right attitude, the best attitude for that moment. We learn what that can be from God's word. As we study God's word we learn the best attitudes to engage in any given situation. With experience we become better prepared to recall the best ones to put into practice when needed.

So to Paul it was important to relate all things in life to what is important to God. In his younger life Paul pursued the things that were important to the people around him. He was proud to be a Hebrew of the tribe of Benjamin. He studied hard to become a good Pharisee and to gain the great respect of his fellow countrymen. He said, "I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor . . . I acted ignorantly and in unbelief" (1 Tim. 1:13). These were all things of fleshly interest to Paul. But when he came to know Jesus he lost interest in fleshly things. He told the Corinthians, **from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh.** The fleshly interests he used to see in others no longer commanded his attention. Now he pursued seeing the things of spiritual interest. He even admitted that in the past he knew **Christ according to the flesh.** He could only conceive of Jesus being a false prophet, a false teacher of godly things. He even persecuted the church in order to blot out the name of Jesus. But when Jesus appeared to him, that view of Jesus all changed. As Paul put it, **Yet now we know Him in this way no longer.**

Certainly for Paul a tremendous change came over him. He explained this change in this way: **Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.** The new things are the spiritual things of interest to God. It includes a clean

slate, being made free of sin and able to start fresh in doing what pleases God. To Paul this means **that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.** This is the heart of the ministry of reconciliation and Paul is delighted that God **has committed to us the word of reconciliation.** Paul clearly states that **all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.** Paul and the world have never been the same since then. Paul had a new motivation for life and desire for service to his new master.

Paul closes this part of his letter with an appeal to the Corinthians who hear this letter read to them. First, he repeats his mission, **therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us.** Then he states his appeal, **we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.** He is telling them there is no greater commitment they could make of their lives than to offer them in service to Jesus as their master. What better master could they serve than to bow in submission to the one God chose to become sin, to take our sin on himself, and pay the price of that sin by dying a torturous death on the cross? Yes it was God who **made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.** God's gift to us now is freedom from sin. Our obligation is to honor God by bowing in obedient service to Him and His Son Jesus. There can be no greater duty for us in this life.

Bible Application

In God's eyes the human mortal life is all about giving service in His name. God set the standard by preparing His Son to give three plus years of intense service in God's work ending by freely offering his life for others. The apostle John said this demonstrated great love, the love of God. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Paul learned quickly this was his key to understanding his obligation to God following his call to service. We all know how Paul responded to what he learned. So now the ball is in our court and we must ask how we will respond to God's call to us to serve Him.

Life Response

It is clear from Paul's New Testament teachings that we can do nothing in our own efforts to secure immortality. If we paid the price for our sins we would die and that would be the end of the story. But we know the price was paid by one accepted by God as the perfect sacrifice. All we can do now is

accept God's gracious gift and show our gratitude by the way we live and give our lives in service to God.

Surprisingly, God wants to reward us for the ways in which we show our gratitude for Him. In verse 10 Paul says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." There is an expectation from God that we will perform deeds of gratitude pleasing to Him. Paul recognized this and was faithful in responding appropriately. It is amazing that God will repay us in kind, that is give us compensation of equivalent return in like manner as we give to others. And we give to others as though we were giving to Him. Paul told the Ephesians, "Whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord" (Eph. 6:8). So, there is good reason for us to do what pleases God just as Paul did. Knowing this, what do you see yourself doing in this life to honor God that you might receive back from Him, in kind, a reward useful to you in His kingdom?

Questions for Discussion

1. What kind of thoughts does the *Introduction* arouse within you?
2. Why is the idea that "they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" so important to God in His overall plan of reconciliation?
3. Why must we see ourselves as servants of God and ambassadors for Christ?
4. What is a believer to do to improve his relationship with God?

Perfecting Holiness

Key Thought: Our relationship with God calls for particular actions regarding the believers (v. 11, 13), and unbelievers (v. 14).

Golden Text: “let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (7:1)

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 6:1–7:1 (New King James Version)

¹ We then, *as* workers together *with Him* also plead with *you* not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For He says:

“In an acceptable time I have heard you,
And in the day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.

³ We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. ⁴ But in all *things* we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, ⁵ in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; ⁶ by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, ⁷ by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, ⁸ by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and *yet* true; ⁹ as unknown, and *yet* well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and *yet* not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and *yet* possessing all things.

¹¹ O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open.

¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your *own* affections.

¹³ Now in return for the same (I speak as to children), you also be open.

¹⁴ Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ¹⁵ And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will dwell in them
And walk among them.
I will be their God,
And they shall be My people.”

¹⁷ Therefore

“Come out from among them
And be separate, says the Lord.
Do not touch what is unclean,
And I will receive you.”
¹⁸ “I will be a Father to you,
And you shall be My sons and daughters,
Says the LORD Almighty.”

^{7:1} Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Life Need

Paul wanted his readers to understand that the church and God have a father / child relationship (as 6:18 says in our text). That relationship with God as Father was gained through Jesus, who had God as his Father (1:3). It is through Christ that we can have our trust in God (3:4) “who raises the dead” (1:9). Paul further emphasized the relationship: “where the Spirit of the Lord [God] is, there is liberty” and “we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in our consciences” (3:17; 4:17). “All things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18). He pleaded that those who were workers in Christ would not “receive the grace of God in vain” (6:1).

Bible Learning

6:1 “workers together” (NKJV) / “fellow workers” (NIV)

Paul just said that God “has given us the ministry of reconciliation” and “has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (5:19). We then are coworkers with God. First, God worked with His son, Jesus, to reconcile us to Himself. Then under Christ’s direction (“for Christ”), we are God’s “ambassadors”. Therefore, we and God are “workers together” (6:1).

We have received God’s favor, which is more often called “grace” (Eph. 2; Rom. 5). We work with God; and the power of our message is the word of God to save people from their sins. Paul was encouraging the church to not disregard and treat what God has done for them as nothing. We live by the grace of God. He has made “now” the “day of salvation” and we have only “now” to receive God’s salvation and to offer others God’s salvation through His son, Jesus Christ our Lord. That is rather like Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:16, “Take heed unto yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.”

6:3 “we give no offense”

The word for “offense” which Paul used in 1 Corinthians 6:3 also appears in 8:9 and in Romans 9:32 and 14:13, 21, though in each of those verses it is translated as being about stumbling, sometimes a stumblingblock. Paul considers that we should be concerned with a weak brother, but, not only that, we must be aware how our words and actions affect everyone we encounter. We serve both those to whom we witness God’s message, perhaps for the first time they hear of the faith, and those in the faith who need our example to grow in Christ. Some will “stumble” when hearing about Jesus, as even did some who Jesus taught himself, but we should seek not to provide offense ourselves. But while we can control our actions, seeking to avoid our ministry being blamed, we cannot control the actions of any who do not receive God’s message.

6:4 “as servants of God” (NIV) / “ministers of God” (NKJV)

In. Verses 4-10 use Paul’s experience as a base for listing situations believers may experience when working for God. Are we able to endure all of these? Romans 8:33-39 tells us we can: “we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (God so loved us that He gave His only begotten son). Nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God”.

By. How do we endure all situations? By “purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by [God’s] holy spirit, by sincere love”. Or, as Paul wrote in Romans 13:9-10, “love does no harm,” and against such things as “the fruit of the Spirit” “there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-25). We are to understand what it means to live “by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God”, as Jesus lived (Matt. 4:4). Wearing the “armor of righteousness” involves adding all these to our lives (Eph. 6:11-18). 2 Peter 1:2-11 adds, “as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him [God] who called us by glory and virtue, by which He [God] has given to us exceedingly great and precious promises”.

As. Believers may experience honor or dishonor. We may be reported as evil or good. We may be called deceivers, impostors. We may be thought of as unintelligent. We may be persecuted, even killed. Yet we maintain our faith in God. We rejoice in the truth. We continue to hope in God’s promised kingdom. Peter also encouraged believers scattered throughout the central Roman empire “as sojourners and pilgrims . . . having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that though they speak against you as evildoers, they by your good works which they observe glorify God in the day of visitation. . . . this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet. 2:9-15).

6:13 Be open

Again Paul gave himself as an example to follow. He opened wide his heart to the church at Corinth. They too should open their hearts also. This is the mature (adult) thing to do; but he added that he spoke to them “as to children” who should grow to this level of faith in God. He followed up in the next verses by emphasizing their father/son, father/daughter reliance on God.

6:14 Be not unequally yoked

From the beginning those who called on the name of Jehovah kept themselves separate from the wickedness around them. Enoch and Noah “walked with God” and God gave them His favor and mercy. Paul warned believers to not have fellowship with “unbelievers”. Jesus commanded his disciples in John 14-17 not to be “of the world” while living in the world. Believers are “the new man which was created according to God in true righteousness and holiness . . . finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness but rather expose them” (Eph. 4:24; 5:10-11).

6:16 The Temple of God

In Paul’s letters “temple of God” refers to “believers” rather than a physical building: “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God . . . fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord . . . built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19, 21-22; compare 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:15-20).

6:17 Come out . . . and be separate

Since the command went out to “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” in Acts 2, God continues to “call out” a people for His name. Christians are “living stones” built by God into a new “spiritual house” called by Paul “the temple of God”. God has called us out and separated us to “walk in the Spirit” of God. Believers listen and live by “every word which proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Believers show in their lives what God shows in Himself, “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23; consider also 24-26, and 1 Cor. 13).

6:18 You are My sons and daughters.

His is the “spirit of adoption” of which Paul spoke in Romans 8. Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with

him” (John 14:23). God promised Abraham, “I will establish My covenant with you . . . to be a God to you and your descendants” (Gen. 17:7). “I will be a Father to you and you will be My sons and daughters” has always been the calling God issued to those who “began to call on the name of Jehovah”.

7:1 Cleanse ourselves . . . perfecting holiness in the fear of God

As willing bondservants of God we enter into an agreement with God. The promises of God generate a response to “be holy as [God] is holy” (1 Pet. 1:15; Matt. 5:48). Since mankind’s status before God is “there is none righteous, no not one” (Rom. 3:10) even believers must learn to be “imitators of God as dear children” (Eph. 5:1). The apostles used the word “flee” to describe the need to remove ourselves from our natural desires (“lusts of the flesh”). (Review 1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:14; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22). To accomplish this change to be “like Him” (1 John 3:1-4) one must imitate God and see Jesus as our example to “lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us” (Heb. 12:1-3). Read Hebrews 12:1-29 and examine the Father/son relationship of God our Father’s involvement in directing His children and how God is concerned with making us ready to receive the inheritance, the kingdom of God.

Suggestions for Discussion:

For background, review how the Old Testament prophets worked with God (e.g. Noah in Genesis 6ff; the call of Moses in Exodus 3-6; the calls of Isaiah and Jeremiah in the early chapters of their books).

Review how Jesus relied on God to do the work of his father/Father (e.g. John 5).

Discuss whether God expects the ultimate perfection, a sinless life (1 John 1-2).

Discuss the relationship of faith and works (you could look at Ephesians 2 and James 2).

Joy in Troubles

Key Thought: Our relationship with God calls for a particular outlook with the problems we have in the world and in our own conduct.

Golden Texts: “In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds” (7:4)
“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” (7:10)

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 7:2-16 (NIV)

²Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. ³I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. ⁴I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

⁵For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within. ⁶But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

⁸Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it – I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while – ⁹yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. ¹¹See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. ¹²So even though I wrote to you, it was neither on account of the one who did the wrong nor on account of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. ¹³By all this we are encouraged.

In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. ¹⁴I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to

Titus has proved to be true as well. ¹⁵ And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. ¹⁶ I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.

Life Need

I vividly recall an event from my training at Oregon Bible College (now Atlanta Bible College, McDonough, Georgia). One of the pastoral instructors, a seasoned pastoral veteran, told his students that if we could see ourselves being happy and content doing *anything* other than pastoral ministry we should do that. He spoke with great sincerity. At the time I was young, idealistic and quite naïve. I couldn't fully grasp what he meant. I'm certainly neither young nor naïve anymore. I have spent nearly 30 years in pastoral ministry now. While I like to think that at times I'm still pretty idealistic, I understand the meaning of my teacher's wise words.

Ministry isn't for wimps. Ministry has challenges, and takes great emotional strength and tenacity to stay with it. I'm sure that every ministry is filled with many ups and downs, emotional highs and lows, whether that is ministry as a professional pastor, a lay pulpit minister, a Sunday school teacher, member of a worship team, youth leader, elder or deacon.

Congregational life carries special concerns for me, as a pastor. As President Truman famously said for his situation, "the buck stops here" – this is also true with pastors. With the calling comes a responsibility which cannot be delegated, and it never leaves. Ministry never ends, the task is never complete. Our unseen enemy is a spiritual force that never sleeps.

Our responsibility in ministry is great. A lawyer's failure can simply cause a client to be imprisoned. A physician's failure can simply cause a patient to die. But when a pastor fails a person's eternal life can be forever lost. Who can bear up under such pressure?

After a personally very discouraging failed attempt at planting a church in another country, this author was so emotionally broken that a year was spent not doing pastoral ministry. At first this brought a sense of relief, with the constant pressure temporarily lifted, but there was also a sense of unrest, dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment. Honest, gainful work was being done, and yet there was a strong push from deep within to return to pastoral ministry. The words of that instructor came back to mind: "if you can be happy doing anything other than pastoral ministry, do it". I discovered that, for me, anything else was *not* an option. Despite its many hurts and sorrows, to me nothing brings a greater sense of joy than the ministry of the Gospel.

Perhaps you are a seasoned ministry veteran. Perhaps you've been involved in significant lay ministry in your church. Perhaps you are discerning a possible call to ministry in your future. Maybe you have no

idea what ministry is all about and are content to simply attend a Sunday school class, listening and learning. Wherever you find yourself Paul's letter gives some plain, honest insights into the challenges of ministry and the unique ways we can come to experience intense, almost indescribable joy, even in the midst of great pain and trouble. Following God's path for your life is no guarantee of being free from trouble, but there is a guarantee of joy that overcomes troubles.

Bible Learning

Ministry is filled with downs, and ups.

Paul's Troubles. It is clear that the internal problems of the church at Corinth presented Paul with many challenges. He went to great lengths attempting to correct these. Biblical evidence indicates Paul had gone there several times, and that he wrote the church perhaps four or more times (though we don't have all of these letters).

It appears that during Paul's second visit to Corinth his authority came under attack from some influential people (Paul labels them "super-apostles"). They seemed determined to discredit and undermine the foundation Paul laid with the Corinthian church. When Paul left Corinth it may have been due to vicious attack from within the church community, resulting in a harsh letter from Paul calling for repentance.

Ministry among the believers was very challenging. Paul tells very pointedly about his time in Macedonia:

"We had no rest." Does he refer to being constantly busy, or to a lack of spiritual / emotional / relational rest more like: "something challenging was always going on and we could never catch a break or come up for air"? At times Paul's troubles in ministry resembled the arcade game "Whac-A-Mole". A mole pops up and you hit it – it drops, but another pops up, and another, and another, so fast that you can't possibly keep whacking them all. Can you relate to the image of trying to deal with a problem but before you get it solved there are more and more problems to deal with?

"harassed at every turn". This simply amplifies what Paul has said about lacking rest. Whichever way he turned, there was more trouble.

"conflicts on the outside". Perhaps some of the conflict came from Judaizers outside the church who wanted to impose the Mosaic law on Gentile believers. They seem to have followed Paul, never letting him have a break. Or were these troubles from a group of rival apostles trying to elevate their status and reputation by tearing down Paul? Paul indicates that some tried to demean his stature or his oratory, suggesting that he was bold in his letters but came across as rather timid and unremarkable in person.

Paul apparently was the subject of a campaign of slander and criticism by some who wished to bring him down and elevate themselves. Paul was not the first, nor the last, to have such a situation in ministry leadership. Moses and Aaron faced attacks in the wilderness. King David was challenged by his own offspring. The long tradition of ministry leaders facing painful attacks from others about their ministry continues today. Chances are that if you are a ministry leader you have experienced such trials and attacks – and if not, brace yourself, your time will come.

“**fears within**”. What Paul briefly mentions here he more clearly articulates in chapter 11. “I face *daily* the pressure of my concern for all the *churches*” (emphasis added). Paul dealt with a lot of internal pressure (which we’ll hear more about in lesson 12). Paul, like most of those who are in pastoral ministry, felt passionately about ministry and serving Jesus Christ. He continued despite struggles, acting on his deep care for the spiritual condition of the churches where he ministered. He took personally the troubles that came up in those churches and doubtless this led to many a sleepless night.

Most of those involved in ministry will understand what Paul felt like. Ministry concerns don’t go away and ministers are never “off the clock” emotionally when it comes to churches. The President never stops being the President, and the pastor never stops being the pastor. Even efforts to de-stress from ministry can be completely unraveled through a single phone call. How many pastors have cut short much needed get-aways, whether vacations or conferences or seminars, due to ministry crises? How many have missed out on holiday celebrations and family events? And how many lay sleepless at night due to concern for a hospitalized parishioner, or the problems of a church member which no one else in the church knows about? Paul experienced this constantly. People involved in significant lay ministries experience this as well. There are concerns about the church people and programs, stresses about money and buildings. Ministry isn’t for wimps.

Paul’s Joys. Yet, despite all of these challenges and troubles that faced Paul (as they do those in ministry today) he is able to say “I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds”. I think if Paul couldn’t think of a word that fully expressed his thoughts / feelings he was creative enough to invent one. Here Paul uses a word which was used by no other biblical writer and for which we have no other evidence of it in literature of the period. *Hyperperisseuō* means “**1**) to abound beyond measure, abound exceedingly **2**) to overflow, to enjoy abundantly”. Even in the midst of countless trials and problems that Paul faced in ministry he

boldly proclaimed his limitless joy. *The Message* reads: “I am overwhelmed with joy despite all our troubles.”

What brought Paul such an experience of great joy? It was a visit he received from Titus, bringing his encouraging report from having recently been in Corinth. The Corinthians had welcomed Titus and they desired to see Paul again. They were concerned for Paul’s well-being, and sorrowed deeply. That sorrow appears to be what made Paul’s joy “greater than ever.”

Apparently Paul had written a letter which really “took to task” the church in Corinth. Its tone and content must have been very harsh, and Paul was afraid it might not be received well. Yet it must have produced in the church a godly sorrow which resulted in changed thinking and actions. Paul is not happy due to their pain but because the letter, albeit painful, had a positive effect in their spiritual lives.

Their godly sorrow spurred them to action. Paul articulates what resulted: “earnestness, eagerness to clear yourself, indignation, alarm, longing, concern, readiness to see justice done” (v. 11). Paul’s message is clear: true repentance facilitates changed behavior, leading to salvation. Worldly sorrow brings only death (v. 10).

The example of Peter and Judas comes to mind (though Paul did not use it). Both men violated Jesus’ trust and betrayed him. Peter denied Jesus, he swore three times that he didn’t know Jesus. Judas sold Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver. Both men were sorrowful afterwards. Peter wept bitterly. Judas tried to give back the money. Yet, in the end, Peter again met with the other Apostles, and was the first of them to visit Jesus’ tomb. Judas went and hanged himself. Peter’s sorrow was of the kind that brought about true repentance and a transformation in his life. Judas was not transformed. His sorrow kept him from facing the other disciples and owning up to his past, and left him no future.

The Corinthians had a godly sorrow which led to appropriate change in their lives. This brought Paul “boundless joy”.

Bible Application

Like Paul, as you serve God in whatever ministries he has called and gifted you to carry out, you have experienced challenges, hurts and hurdles (and you can expect them to continue). Obviously sometimes they come from outsiders who are unfriendly to Christianity, as for believers living in countries like Pakistan. Sometimes the trials are from within the Church family, for Christians are not exempt from conflicts and the hurtful actions of other believers. Sometimes the troubles come from within a believer’s own heart, internal shame, insecurity, and paranoia. As Walt Kelly wrote in his cartoon *Pogo*: “we have met the enemy, and he is us”.

Whatever the source of trouble, Paul teaches us that we can still find, in our faith, reasons to rejoice. We can experience “boundless joy”. Paul’s boundless joy came through his willingness to confront sin directly, painfully and lovingly, because the ones he confronted arrived at godly sorrow and true repentance. We live in an age when Paul most likely would be deemed intolerant or politically incorrect for how he confronted sinful behavior. Perhaps we need to leave our comfort zones and address sin more clearly and directly, urging repentance that leads to salvation.

After chest pains I underwent a stress test (which I passed). Then my young, skinny, doctor told me I was obese and needed to lose weight. At that moment I didn’t really like him, which didn’t make his words any less true. It was up to me how I chose to respond. He could diagnose the problem but he couldn’t make me follow through. (Though I’m sure it would have pleased and surprised him if I had shed 50 pounds in the next six months.)

Life Response

True joy, lasting joy, joy that “knows no bounds” can only come when we do what is right, when we make changes that are right. What changes do you need to make that will result in “boundless joy”? No one can make those changes for you. You and you alone are the “captain of your soul”.

Questions for Discussion

1. What challenges in ministry have you seen or experienced that might cause anxiety, discouragement, depression or despair?
2. Which of the four kinds of troubles Paul mentioned do you find the most difficult to deal with: “no rest”, “harassed at every turn”, “conflicts on the outside”, or “fears within”? Why is that?
3. When have you experienced “superabundant joy” despite difficult circumstances? What enabled you to transcend your experience?
4. In your own words, what is the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow? Why does this matter so much?
5. Doctors sometimes facilitate physical healing by inflicting pain. Counselors and therapists often address painful issues in the past to facilitate emotional healing. Under what circumstances would it be appropriate for pastors and others in Christian leadership to, like Paul, inflict spiritual pain to facilitate spiritual healing (godly repentance)?
6. In what ways is “the enemy” *us* when it comes to how we deal with troubles in our lives and the life of the Church?
7. What changes do you personally need to make in order to experience true “boundless joy”? What first steps will you take?

Service to the Lord's People

Key Thought: On the occasion of a special offering for the saints in Jerusalem, Paul gives the most comprehensive teaching on giving.

Golden Text: “God loves a cheerful giver.” (9:7)

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15 (NIV)

^{8:1} And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

⁷ But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

¹⁰ And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.

¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³ Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.”

^{9:6} Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: “He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

¹¹ You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Lesson Background

Paul wrote this part of his letter to encourage the Corinthian church to complete the collections they started a year earlier in preparation for his return – which is soon. Paul's previous letter covers a similar topic when he makes a case that Christian workers have a right to be paid for their work (1 Cor. 9:14), though Paul himself did not claim this right (1 Cor. 9:15). It seems in this second letter, Paul is once again reminding the church that it is important that they fund the ministry, not only for the sake of the ministry but for their own sake as well, namely as a response of thanksgiving to God.

Bible Application

1. Lesson from Macedonia: out of severe trial and extreme poverty, their overflowing joy resulted in rich generosity. (8:1-7)

In the popular country song "My List" a man speaks of things he has left to do before his life ends, including to "put an extra five in the plate at church." It's possible that was being presented as a noble gesture, but I chuckle when I think of such a wealthy singer referring to tossing an extra five dollars in a collection plate as though it belongs on a bucket list of things to do.

At the risk of throwing country music under the bus, another of its song declares, "Preacher, maybe you didn't see me throw an extra twenty in the plate" and goes on "Here's a ten to help you remember, next time you got the good Lord's ear, say I'm comin' but there ain't no hurry, I'm havin' fun down here."

Sadly these songs offer the perception many people have about giving money to church or charities. A small sum is given almost as an afterthought. It is given either to make a person feel better or as a payment seeking God's favor, making up for the kind of "fun" you have been having. Paul speaks in our lesson text of giving as so much more than this.

Thankfully many Christians understand true giving better than the world does, but it may be that, unfortunately, most do not.

A column by Terry Mattingly described conclusions from the book *Behind the Stained Glass Windows: Money Dynamics in the Church*, by John and Sylvia Ronsvalle. It says that over half of the members in a given congregation donate little or nothing, and that those who do give often do so for reasons which are not the best (like making sure the building will look nice for weddings and funerals, or to pay for inspiring sermons, youth programs and pastoral counseling). It seems that some people in churches want to please God in their finances, but don't know how to. We need to see ourselves as investing in "the hearts and lives of others" when we give to our churches. But too many seem to have no desire to see their churches grow.

Perhaps this lesson will touch a few hearts to find the true measure of how God intends His children to help advance His Kingdom and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The church in Jerusalem was in need of financial help and Paul urges the Corinthian church to lend support. He uses the Macedonian church as an example of what true giving should be like. It is important to note the circumstances of Paul's example. He says that out of the most severe trial and extreme poverty the church in Macedonia produced overflowing joy, which resulted in rich generosity. No doubt Paul was faced with the same struggles that many ministries face today with getting donors to support their work. But Paul found one group who understood the true meaning of giving. How did they see things? One thing Paul made sure to mention was that **"they gave themselves first to the Lord."** In Christian giving the money we provide is to be used to equal out financial inequities among God's servants, wherever they are called. As Paul stated in our text, we help those in need now so that some day they in turn can help us when we are in need. It is vital that we first commit ourselves to God, to be in tune with His plans, so we can understand where He is going. Only then will we know which ministries we should help finance. Do so willingly! Do so with joy!

2. We have the privilege of sharing as much as we are able and even beyond. (8:10-15)

Paul makes it clear that he is not *commanding* the people to give. He is advising them, and appealing to their generosity. Collections had been started under Titus a year earlier but were incomplete, so Paul is sending Titus back with his letter to remind them to finish that work. He reminds them that they were not only the first to give last year, but that they also had the desire. A willingness to give is important no matter how great or small

the gift (as with the widow living in poverty who gave all that she had; Mark 12:41-44). Paul also explains the purpose of the giving. It was not so that others could benefit at their expense, but so that there would be equality of finances within the church, where needs are met by those willing and able to give to help.

3. Each person should not give reluctantly or grudgingly, for God loves a cheerful giver. (9:6-11)

Paul is probably quoting a well known farming proverb when he writes that he who sows sparingly will reap little while he who sows generously will reap much. Jesus promised the same when he said “Give and it will be given you . . . For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38). Paul is promoting the principle of investing in God’s people, who are working toward advancing the Kingdom. By doing so we not only supply the needs of His people, perhaps more importantly we express our thankfulness for all that God has done for us! As it has been said, when I give, I am blessed more than he who receives. From our abundance, we share with others. A friend once shared with me his thoughts on the good job he had. “I consider my job, not as a career in and of itself, but as a way to care for my family and support my church.” I think that is a healthy way to consider wealth.

4. The service you perform not only supplies the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in an expression of thanks to God. (9:12-15)

It’s technically called “The Law of the Harvest,” but we commonly say, “What goes around comes around” when referring to the law of reaping what we sow. When we give to someone who is poor, that person can’t pay us back, but blessings seem to come our way from out of the blue. Jesus said that it’s no big deal to give to those who can give back to us. The really big deal is to give to those who can’t repay us. Who are the poor around us? They are real people with real needs and real hopes and dreams. – Zig Ziglar

In my few years of service on the board of directors for the college and conference, one area I have struggled to fully understand is the discipline of donor giving. Among the duties for directors is to promote the conference and seek the means to finance its operations. I have struggled in that last part, finding it difficult to ask people for money, perhaps primarily because I don’t like people asking me for money. But I’ve spent hours grueling over budgets and learning what the donated money goes toward, and now I see

more clearly that this should not be a conflict for me. Paul says in our lesson text that the money one gives to a ministry provides not only for the needs of God’s people, but that it also expresses thanks for God’s blessings in an overflowing manner. So when a ministry asks for money it first is communicating a need and it is also providing an opportunity for the giver to be part of that ministry for which thanksgiving is acknowledged and hopefully given.

First Corinthians says a great deal about how a worker is due his share of income, through support of those he or she ministers to. In 2 Corinthians Paul mentions that the Macedonians urgently pleaded with him for the *privilege* of sharing in the service to the saints. It seems Paul did not *have* to ask for donations, because his donors unexpectedly “gave themselves *first* to the Lord and *then* to us in keeping with God’s will.” Perhaps the ministries we try to support would have easier tasks if we held that mindset in our *own* planned giving.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Paul use the Macedonians as an example in giving for the Corinthians? What principles of giving are important to understand?
2. Is there something I planned to do a year ago that Paul might need to remind me to finish?
3. Considering what the lives of the poor are like, is there one thing you can do to help them now?
4. Where in the world around me do I see inequality, and what can I do about it?
5. How do I decide what it is in my heart to give, and to whom? How is God’s will made known to me in the area of giving?
6. How does the money I give to my church, missions, conference, or other ministry specifically work toward advancing the Kingdom of God?
7. Is it more the responsibility of a ministry to create excitement and desire for a donor to want to give, or more the responsibility of a donor to give oneself to God in seeking His will for how and where to give? What steps would allow both to improve and meet in the middle?
8. How have you been blessed by being generous to others in ministry?

Paul Defends His Ministry

Key Thought: In defending his apostleship Paul describes important aspects of apostolic ministry

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 10:1-18 (NRSV)

¹ I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ – I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away! – ² I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards.

³ Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments ⁵ and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ. ⁶ We are ready to punish every disobedience when your obedience is complete.

⁷ Look at what is before your eyes. If you are confident that you belong to Christ, remind yourself of this, that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we. ⁸ Now, even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it. ⁹ I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters. ¹⁰ For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.” ¹¹ Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present.

¹² We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense. ¹³ We, however, will not boast beyond limits, but will keep within the field that God has assigned to us, to reach out even as far as you. ¹⁴ For we were not overstepping our limits when we reached you; we were the first to come all the way to you with the good news of Christ. ¹⁵ We do not boast beyond limits, that is, in the labors of others; but our hope is that, as your faith increases, our sphere of action among you may be greatly enlarged, ¹⁶ so that we may proclaim the good news in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in someone else’s sphere of action. ¹⁷ “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” ¹⁸ For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends.

Introduction

Earlier our study of 2 Corinthians covered Paul's defense of his apostleship and ministry, before an extended section on the collection for the saints in Jerusalem as well as general principles about giving. In chapter 10 Paul resumes his defense of his apostleship with such a combative tone that many scholars have concluded that chapters 10-13 might be an additional letter of Paul appended to an already written letter composed of chapters 1-9.

That idea might have more backing than one would first think. There is considerable evidence that Paul wrote multiple letters to the church at Corinth. He alludes to a letter prior to 1 Corinthians: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons" (1 Cor. 5:9).

In 2 Corinthians 2 and 5 Paul writes of another letter: "For I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you" (2 Cor. 2:4). "For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you with that letter, though only briefly)" (2 Cor. 7:8).

At one time many scholars thought that the "sorrowful letter" might be Paul's description of 1 Corinthians, but today most think that it refers to a letter even more forceful in nature than 1 Corinthians. Others have thought that the "sorrowful letter" might be 2 Corinthians 10-11, but this author finds most persuasive the idea that what we call 2 Corinthians 10-13 was written sometime after 2 Corinthians 1-9.

Those who think that the entirety of 2 Corinthians was written as one letter still note the significant change in style as Paul commences with the final four chapters. It has been suggested that he might have "slept on" the original letter and decided that he needed to write the same things again but more forcefully.

Ralph Martin, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, suggests the following timeline for the Apostle Paul's interactions with the church in Corinth.

AD 50–51	Paul establishes the church at Corinth.
51–54	Paul writes to Corinth (letter A; now lost, see 1 Cor 5:9).
54	Paul writes to Corinth after having heard oral reports of the church's problems (letter B; our 1 Corinthians).
(Spring) 55	Paul's emergency visit to Corinth. He is confronted and is required to leave in a hurry (2 Cor 1:15 ff.).
(Summer) 55	Paul writes again to the Corinthians (the "tearful" letter C of 2 Cor 2:4; 7:8, now lost).
(Fall) 55	Paul is met by Titus in Macedonia. He receives word that the Corinthians had experienced a change of heart; therefore

he dispatches another letter to say that he is pleased and confident (letter D; 2 Cor 1–9).

Paul receives word that the Corinthians' attitudes have taken a turn for the worse; therefore he writes to correct them and to defend his apostolic authority (letter E; 2 Cor 10–13). He later visits the city where (presumably but not certainly) he is well received. If this was the case, then he was able to winter there and compose the epistle to the Romans.

As Paul defends his apostleship we will see his understanding of what it means to be an apostle.

Bible Learning

1. Paul's use of "I, Paul" adds force to his words. We will see later that Paul's opponents have accused him of being unimpressive in person, so he begins by referencing the meekness and gentleness of Jesus.

2-3. Paul suggests that he doesn't want to be forceful when he is present but it isn't because he is weak.

4. As Paul continues to address his opponents he uses a vocabulary that sounds like it comes from a military manual: "weapons of our warfare", "destroy strongholds", "take every thought captive".

A stronghold can be a fortress or it might refer to any type of easily defended spot. The word is used 42 times in the NRSV and is often used in a good sense about God being our stronghold. But it is also used to describe the fortresses of the enemy. Proverbs 21:22 uses it in the sense that Paul uses in today's text: "One wise person went up against a city of warriors and brought down the stronghold in which they trusted".

Paul uses *stronghold* in the sense of a pervasive philosophy, institution, or slogan of the world that stands in opposition to God. In context it appears that such strongholds have infiltrated the church.

5. Paul continues the thought by saying that "we take every thought captive to obey Christ." In context Paul appears to be challenging the thoughts of others. In our *Bible Application* we will consider a personal application of this scripture.

6. Paul now warns that he will punish those who have been disobedient. In defending his apostleship he demonstrates some aspects of apostleship, including the correcting of teaching and also the giving of discipline.

7. In 1 Corinthians 1:12 Paul described the various factions of the Corinthian church: "I belong to Paul", "I belong to Apollos", "I belong to Cephas [Peter]", or "I belong to Christ". Paul appears to be talking to the group who claimed to be "of Christ," and says that he, too, is of Christ.

8-11. It appears that the accusation against Paul is that he talks tough in his letters but he isn't very impressive in person. It seems obvious that the attack on Paul has become very personal. He warns that he will not back down from his letters when he is actually in Corinth.

Note that Paul says that his authority is for building up and not for tearing down. An apostle is there to build.

12-13. We don't know for certain the identity of Paul's opponents in Corinth but it appears that they try to get ahead by comparing themselves to others. It appears that would include lifting themselves up at Paul's expense. Paul refuses to do likewise but simply says that what they are doing does not show good sense.

14-16. It appears that Paul has been accused of overstepping his limits, perhaps meaning that his opponents are claiming Corinth to be their territory. It is important for Paul to defend his right to minister in Corinth because he intends to extend his missionary work from there.

17-18. Paul concludes his initial defense with a Readers' Digest version of Jeremiah 9:23-24 and then expands upon it in verse 18.

Bible Application

We would hope never to face a church situation like the one Paul dealt with in Corinth, but he introduces some concepts that are applicable in our churches and individual lives today.

The first is the stronghold, a line of defense against the work of Christ in your community, your church or your life. At times the church has challenged perceived strongholds in society, such as the Abolitionist movement challenging the evil of slavery or the Prohibition movement attempting to remove the negative effects of alcohol in our society. Could our church challenge a stronghold in our community?

It has been suggested that we can have personal strongholds as well, areas of our life where we have not given God control. How do we identify those strongholds? Consider Galatians 5:19-21:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Do you ever experience any of these works of the flesh in your life? There might be a stronghold involved, especially if you fall regularly into one particular sin. The stronghold might be keeping something a secret so that no one can help you deal with it. It might be the habit of comparing

ourselves to others that leads us into negative behavior. Perhaps the issue is that we always have to get our way. Or maybe it is something we simply label “a bad habit”.

Closely related to this is the idea of “taking every thought captive”. How many times is fleshly behavior initiated by “stinkin’ thinkin’”? As Proverbs 23:7 says, “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (NASB).

Our thinking can get us into trouble. I remember one afternoon after a very good church service. At first I was simply thinking about how good it had been. Then I started thinking about who wasn’t there. Then I began imagining reasons as to why they weren’t there. Suddenly I realized that my good mood had turned into a real funk. I said out loud, “Stop it!” Immediately I felt as if a cloud had been lifted from me. I’d allowed negative thinking to overwhelm me but it left when I rebuked it. We have to take every thought captive.

Another thing we can do is think helpful thoughts. The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Life Response

Take a personal inventory of your life. Is there an area of your life where you feel like a failure? Might there be a stronghold involved? How is bad thinking contributing to this? How can good thinking make a difference?

Now let’s take a step further back. As damaging as sin can be, the meaning we attach to sin can be even more damaging. Does sin really mean that you are a failure? Do you think you can’t change? Do you think that God can’t love you if you sin? These are strongholds, too, footholds for the accuser to say that what God says about us isn’t true, that in Jesus Christ we really aren’t forgiven.

Paul said that he used his authority to build up, not to tear down. Jesus said that the thief comes to kill and steal and destroy but he has come that we might “have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). When we examine our lives, good thinking means that we think like Jesus thinks about us.

Questions for Discussion

1. After reading the *Lesson Background*, describe Paul’s ministry in Corinth.
2. Why would a person with authority not want to overuse that authority?
3. What military terms do you find in today’s text?

4. What are the names of some famous strongholds in military history?
How is *stronghold* used in a good sense in scripture? What strongholds might Paul want to destroy in Corinth?
5. What do you think Paul meant when he said that he would punish the disobedient?
6. How can authority be used to build up? How can authority tear down?
7. Why does it not make good sense to compare yourself to others?
8. What are some strongholds in society today?
9. What kind of stronghold can an individual have that keeps God from working in an area of one's life?
10. Can habits be strongholds?
11. What kind of thinking gets people into trouble?

Godly Jealousy

Key Thought: We need to relate to other Christians in terms of what they need, not what we desire.

Golden Text: “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ” (11:2).

What happens when “godly jealousy” ignites?

“Godly jealousy” sounds like an oxymoron. Does it make sense that God, the Creator, even exhibits jealousy? He has no rivals. But some Old Testament passages show that God’s chosen people Israel, His bride, was acting as if the groom didn’t exist. The nation’s total devotion to idol worship aroused a totally justified jealousy from the Almighty, with deadly results.

But while godly jealousy exists, was the great apostle Paul justified when he wrote claiming to possess godly jealousy? “I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (11:2)? If we give Paul the benefit of the doubt, what was the outcome of his divine jealousy?

Let’s get to the text to find out.

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 11:1-15 (NRSV)

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you. Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God’s good news to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will continue to refrain from burdening you in any way. As the

truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! And what I do I will also continue to do, in order to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity to be recognized as our equals in what they boast about. For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds.

Divine vs. petty jealousy

Could it be that when Paul asked his readers to indulge him in a little foolishness he had first been stirred by a petty spirit emerging from hurt? It seems as though Corinthian believers were thinking of Paul as inferior to other apostles, less skillful in speech, meek and mild. Perhaps they perceived men like Peter and John as super-apostles who did not mince words, and Paul's demeanor did not measure up against the superior confidence they exuded.

If we stop there in reading Paul his remarks do sound like a petty pity party, resulting from the comparison of Paul's communication skills with the masterful styles of teachers who followed after him at Corinth. When the Apostle first presented Christ there his message truly resonated in people's hearts, changing corinthianizers into Christ-followers. But these new teachers said things in such a persuasive manner that Paul's instructions were left in the dustbin of the past. Apparently newer teachers even demeaned the apostle, leaving the impression that Paul was unfit, unprepared, untrained, and unqualified.

"How dare they!" Paul fired back.

Then the apostle challenged their charges with a reasoned defense of his qualifications, calling it divine jealousy. He begins his argument by using the bride/bridegroom illustration, with Paul as a true friend of both the bride and bridegroom. "I wanted to bring you as a pure bride to Christ, your bridegroom," he declared. They were fresh and new converts, like a virgin brought to her groom. Now it was like they had become corrupted through practices urged on them by teachers who were not really interested in their spiritual welfare.

Jewish marriage customs

Paul uses Jewish wedding customs his readers and critics knew well. In the Old Testament Israel was often referred to as God's bride. Isaiah declared: "For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name" (Isa. 54:5) and "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God

rejoice over you” (62:5). Paul transfers that metaphor, describing the Corinthian church as the bride of Christ.

Jewish weddings involved a friend of the groom and a friend of the bride who had special duties, acting as liaisons between the bride and the bridegroom. They carried special invitations to the guests, and handled the many details of the ceremony. One important responsibility was that they guaranteed the chastity of the bride. Paul saw himself as a friend of the groom, assuring the chastity of the bride. He was doing all that he could to keep the Corinthian church pure, fit to be Christ’s bride.

Knowing technique vs. knowing Christ

Paul recognized the technical skills of the new Corinthian teachers. Clearly they had been trained in speaking, to such an extent that Christians in Corinth found it exciting to hear them. The version of Christianity they expounded must have seemed superior to Paul’s. They were professionals and he was a mere amateur. The word *untrained* in the Greek had carried with it the idea of a private person who took no part in public life. By Paul’s day it came to mean someone with no technical expertise. But technique by itself does not guarantee truth. In this case, Paul knew what he was talking about, and they did not. They were just technical experts.

A famous story involves a group of folks enjoying dinner together who began to discuss oratory. The challenge was made to recite something well known. An actor began the contest and recited Psalm 23. He used all the resources of oratory and dramatic art and fantastic applause followed. A somber and quiet man followed, reciting the same Psalm, sparking some laughter at first. But by the time he finished there was a stillness that was more eloquent than any applause. Afterward the actor leaned over to him and declared, “Sir, I know the Psalm, but you know the shepherd.” Paul might not have oratory and dramatic pause at his disposal, but he knew what he was talking about because he knew the real Christ.

Support vs. no support

One of the complaints these new teachers had about Paul was his methodology. He didn’t ask for support from the church while he was teaching in Corinth. That must be because he knew his teaching was irrelevant if he didn’t trust his life into the hands of his hearers. Further, Paul was inconsistent because he wrote to Timothy that “the laborer deserves to be paid” (1 Tim. 5:18).

Wasn’t it also strange that Paul could maintain financial independence while in Corinth yet accept money from the church at Philippi? Shouldn’t he accept support from where he was working instead of leaning on others?

What we have here is the apostle's modus operandi. While he was in Philippi he did not accept the support of believers there. And in Corinth he worked at tentmaking for part of his support (Acts 18:1-5). In fact everywhere Paul traveled and taught he made it a point to work free of local support. He was not inconsistent, he was being independent.

There's value in that independence. While ministering in an area he could do so without being indebted to his hearers. He was under no obligation to anyone. After all, it would be hard to preach to someone of their sins and accept money from them for that ministry. So while he was at Corinth he could freely receive any love gifts from the Philippians and thus not align himself with any well-meaning financial support at Corinth. He was not a company man, a party man, or a union man. Paul was his own man, proclaiming the good news of God. It was impossible for him while in Corinth to receive their support and at the same time maintain independence when the situation demanded. Paul was not inconsistent; he was wise.

Work vs. no work

Apparently the Christians at Corinth were annoyed at his insistence of working at tentmaking and refusing their support. But why? Shouldn't they be thrilled that Paul was glad to fund his own support?

In that day it was beneath a free person's dignity to work with his own hands. The Greeks and Romans had slaves to do the hard work. There was no dignity in honest toil.

Another Greco-Roman practice was that persons who were good at talking made a good living. Some of the finest orators commanded year-long salaries from political rulers of the empire. In fact, teachers of oratory and literature were exempt from local, city, state, and empire taxes. They made money from the people they taught. Paul's independence was something the Corinthians could not understand.

Of course the false apostles made Paul's independence a charge against him. After all, the fact that they took support for themselves was proof that they were really apostles. Obviously Paul's teaching was not worth anything. Probably deep down they feared that eventually the people might see right through them. So they attempted to drag Paul down.

As the Christians at Corinth knew very well, Paul was never afraid of work. Be it gospel work or work with his own hands, the apostle was glad to do it all. They knew he loved them, enough to toil day and night for their spiritual benefit.

Disguise vs. genuine

Paul then reveals who these false apostles really were behind the mask – workers for Satan. He is referencing a Jewish legend that Satan disguised himself as one of the angels praising God and it was then that Eve saw him and was seduced.

So even in their town Corinthian Christians should not be surprised that ministers who seem righteous are disguising their own motives – to lie, cheat, tell falsehoods, and degrade genuine gospel work. Their end will match their deeds.

What about you and me?

How does this text apply to us today?

What happens when we find persons of other churches who share our doctrines doing effective gospel work? Is our jealousy petty or godly? Should we come alongside them or work against them?

How are you doing as a member of the body and bride of Christ? How would you measure your faithfulness to Jesus?

If the devil is alive and well in your life, where or how have you been seduced and yielded to him?

Technology plays a critical part in presenting the gospel today. What are some of the technical presentations that you and your church are doing?

Tech is not the message, only the medium. How do you go about presenting the message effectively?

Ministering the gospel often requires working for your own support, commonly called tentmaking today. How do you feel about tentmaking ministry?

How can your church help support other churches who have more financial need than you do?

The Pressure of My Concern

Key Thought: Paul's physical and emotional struggles came from his passion for serving God and His kingdom and accomplishing God's mission for his life, and were a testimony to God's grace.

Golden Text: "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (11:28)

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10 (NIV)

¹⁶ I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. ¹⁷ In this

self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool.

¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. ¹⁹ You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! ²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

What anyone else dares to boast about – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of

the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

^{12:1} I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. ³ And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – ⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Bible Learning

Some can’t appreciate the British comedy group Monty Python (some of their humor is quite inappropriate), but I find that some of their work is not only very funny but gets at the truth of things. One sketch I particularly like is about four Yorkshiremen of advanced years and obvious wealth. In the sketch they reminisce over cigars and wine about their difficult and humble beginnings. Soon they are competing over this. One says he was lucky to get a cup of tea, with no milk, sugar or tea. One drank from a broken cup. Another drank from a rolled up newspaper. One speaks of his poverty and having been happy even to live in a house with holes in the roof. Another says he was one of 26 people living in a room which lacked half its floor. The third brags of living in a shoebox, and the fourth of living in a paper bag in a septic tank. In a final attempt at declaring extreme poverty one says:

Right. I had to get up in the morning at ten o’clock at night half an hour before I went to bed, drink a cup of sulphuric acid, work twenty-nine hours a day down mill, and pay mill owner for permission to come to work, and when we got home, our dad and our mother would kill us and dance about on our graves singing “Hallelujah”.

To which another replies: “And you try and tell the young people of today that – they won’t believe you.”

Have you ever heard an old-timer brag about how rough things used to be? Or maybe now you are that old-timer doing so. I tell my kids that I used to walk to school three miles in the snow, uphill coming and going, with no shoes on, over broken glass. They would find that easier to believe than that we had no DVDs, no video games, no computers, and were lucky to get three channels (no cable) on our black and white TV, which we had to select without a remote control.

Why do people tell those stories? Is it that we want younger generations to know how much easier they have it than we had it? Maybe it’s therapeutic to talk about difficult times we’ve experienced. Maybe we want our listeners to see importance in persevering. Or perhaps we tell those stories so that others might see that no matter how difficult things get (and they can be very difficult indeed) God is still there working, and we should never give up on God.

The Apostle Paul told the Church at Corinth about how rough he had it as an apostle, and Paul had a very good reason for his boasting.

Bible Learning

Paul was dealing with attacks on his authority at Corinth from some who he called “super-apostles”. They altered the Word of God and created a false Gospel. Apparently, to establish credibility for themselves they boasted and made great claims about who they were and their abilities and teaching. We could think of the magician Simon as such a person. He tried to buy the ability to give the Holy Spirit to whomever he wished (Acts 8). Gnosticism was already strongly impacting the church. There was also a strong influence from Judaizers who wanted to require Gentile believers to follow the Jewish laws in order to be Christian. Paul faced challenges wherever he turned, and people were trying to discredit him.

Paul counters this with the rhetorical tool of satire, saying “since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast” (v. 18). Paul intends to turn their boasting back on them. They are willing to brag about how great they imagine they are, so he will brag about his actual credentials. Jesus told his disciples that sometimes you have to be “as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves” (Matt. 10:16).

Paul proceeds to give his resume and experience. “I have worked much harder” (v. 23) “been in prison more frequently” “been flogged more severely”. (Do you see why the four Yorkshiremen came to mind?) Paul even admits “I am out of my mind to talk like this.” It is an effective debate tactic to say absurd things to point out the absurdity of an opponent’s

position. That seems to be what Paul is doing here. In other words Paul is saying something like: “If you want to make it a contest to see who has suffered the most for Jesus, I’ll win that contest every day.” It should come as no surprise to us how much Paul did suffer. Much of this is documented in the book of Acts, but in particular we know that Jesus warned that Paul would suffer. He told Ananias “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). We aren’t told that it bothered Paul very much. In fact he seemed to wear his suffering as a badge of honor. “I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). He went through beatings, imprisonment, shipwrecks, hunger, thirst, cold, and long sleepless nights. Paul embraced all of this for the sake of participating in the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

On top of the other things Paul suffered there was his constant concern for “all the churches”. Perhaps the greatest suffering came in his concern that the people of God not lose their focus on God and His will for their lives. The person who is in leadership must be the one who keeps firmly focused on the mission of the organization, despite a thousand side issues which try to steal attention. Paul had to keep his eye on what Jesus had called him and all the church to be doing. He didn’t want matters to get derailed by the influence of Gnostics or Judaizers. He wanted the Church to keep focused on the Gospel of the Kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ. He had many “sleepless nights” of concern and worry. When he wrote to the Philippian Christians he implored them to “not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Phil. 4:6). This is excellent spiritual advice, and Paul probably had to remind himself of this on many occasions. Paul understood all too well the nature of anxiety and worry, and how important prayer is to help counter such human inclinations.

To keep the Church focused on mission Paul was willing to sacrifice anything and everything. There is no falsehood in Paul “who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” Paul was fully in touch with his brokenness. Paul’s boasting here was not out of a sense of pride, but out of an understanding of his own weakness.

Paul was battling having his ministry discredited by unfavorable comparisons with “super-apostles” who seemed to have more spectacular abilities or greater spirituality than him. Paul had no desire to “toot his own horn” but he saw the need, for the sake of the credibility of his message and the validity of the Gospel he proclaimed, to help the Corinthians understand that there were things in his life that were pretty amazing, although he didn’t go around bragging about them.

He describes a vision he had that was so incredible he struggled to find adequate words to describe it – something in heaven that was “inexpressible”. What was it? Was he, like Moses, given a brief glimpse of the glory of God? Whatever the nature of the vision was it left a lasting impact on Paul. It seems that Paul held back from revealing more for fear that people would think too highly of him. Paul was being discredited, marginalized, through comparisons with people who seemed more impressive (but who may simply have been better at self-promotion), yet he was concerned about going too far in having people think highly of him. Paul needed to have enough of a good reputation to get people to take his message about God seriously, but not so good that it took people’s focus off of the main thing, the Gospel.

Already as the recipient of such an incredible vision Paul had to battle his own ego. He says that, as a way of keeping him grounded and not to exalt in himself, Paul had a “thorn in my flesh” or a “messenger of Satan” to torment him. Some have suggested this “thorn” was a physical ailment, perhaps very poor eyesight, that made ministry challenging. Some have suggested a hot temper, impatience, or pride. Some say it might be a person or group who opposed Paul’s ministry. But we can only speculate. Paul did not specify the nature of the “thorn”, his interest was in God’s choice for it to remain, helping him rely on God and not become conceited.

In that verse “conceited” is translated from the Greek word *hyperairō*. It has been described as meaning: 1) to lift or raise up over some thing; 2) to lift one’s self up, be exalted, be haughty; 3) to carry one’s self haughtily to, behave insolently towards one (<http://www.blueletterbible.org>). Paul only used this term one other place, when he described the Man of Lawlessness who “will exalt himself over everything” (2 Thess. 2:4). Paul does *not* want to have a haughty attitude, it is incredibly dangerous spiritually. His difficult personal challenges served an important spiritual purpose.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” For Paul this important truth was born in struggle and hardship. He discovered that true strength comes from recognizing our personal weaknesses and trusting God in the midst of the hardships.

Bible Application

Do you ever worry about what your reputation is with others? You might wonder what impact their opinions of you will have on the way you represent Jesus Christ. Paul is walking a fine line here. Paul knew his mission was not to exalt himself. He wanted to exalt God our Father and Jesus Christ, our king and savior. But “super-apostles” thought differently. We have some celebrity-type people in the Church today, both leaders and

celebrities in Christian music. They can be very gifted communicators, but much of the attention they draw is to themselves, in mega-churches or media ministries. Some of those who shine like superstars come across to us as slick.

There are also many faithful and godly men and women who serve far from the spotlight, some pastoring small churches. They are not gifted at self-promotion and don't have the ability to dazzle with movie star good looks or charisma, yet they labor deep and long humbly serving God. If you compare their weekly sermons to those of popular television preachers they might seem far less gifted. Paul's oratorical skills and stage persona, too, would not compare favorably. Yet, like Paul, many serve God consistently and faithfully in the midst of struggle, physically, emotionally, relationally and spiritually. Like Paul, many deal with their personal thorns in the flesh, but that doesn't mean that they haven't been with God.

Remember, Christian ministry isn't about us, it's about God. But also remember, that when we've been with God and experienced first hand the blessings of His presence and power in our lives, we might need to share "just enough" to lend credibility to what we have to share.

Life Response

We don't need to sit around "one upping" each other about past difficulties, but we do need honest believers who are willing to open up to others about how faithful God has been and is, even in the midst of our deepest struggles. We can know for ourselves and help others to learn that God is faithful and that His grace really is sufficient. People need to know that, yes, when we are at our weakest point in brokenness and recurring trials, we need not give up. God is all we need to get us through.

Think through your testimony. What might God want you to share, not to exalt yourself, but to exalt Him?

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you suppose people tell stories about how difficult their lives once were?
2. What was Paul's primary reason for boasting?
3. How might a "Super Apostle" today focus attention on oneself rather than on God?
4. What things in ministry might Christian leaders get anxious about?
5. What are some "thorns in the flesh" you've seen/experienced in your life, ministry? How has God's grace been sufficient for you?
6. How can we avoid focusing too much on ourselves, yet share enough for others to see how God has worked faithfully in our lives?

Examine Oneself

Key Thought: We can examine ourselves to determine we are in Christ.

Lesson Text: 2 Corinthians 12:11–13:13 (NRSV)

¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works.

¹³ How have you been worse off than the other churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

¹⁴ Here I am, ready to come to you this third time. And I will not be a burden, because I do not want what is yours but you; for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? ¹⁶ Let it be assumed that I did not burden you. Nevertheless (you say) since I was crafty, I took you in by deceit. ¹⁷ Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? We are speaking in Christ before God. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up. ²⁰ For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. ²¹ I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and that I may have to mourn over many who previously sinned and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness that they have practiced.

^{13:1} This is the third time I am coming to you. “Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” ² I warned those who sinned previously and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I will not be lenient – ³ since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. ⁴ For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

⁵ Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless, indeed,

you fail to meet the test! ⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed. ⁷ But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong – not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. ⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹ For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect. ¹⁰ So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

¹³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Introduction

In today's text the Apostle Paul concludes his defense of his apostleship. We could just focus on the problems in Corinth but we can also apply his correction constructively in our churches and in our lives. In this text we can find numerous practices that lead to healthy churches and spiritual growth.

Bible Learning

12:11-13. Paul and the Super-Apostles. In the previous verses Paul has been sharing experiences that demonstrate his faithfulness and the way God has been working in his life. This goes against his desire to allow Christ to be seen in his weakness but he has determined that it was necessary because the Corinthians have been comparing him unfavorably to others, those whom Paul calls the super-apostles.

There's no definitive answer as to who these super-apostles are. In this text it could be easy to think that he is talking about the Twelve who were present at Pentecost, or James, Peter and John, whom Paul identified as pillars in Galatians 2:9. Paul doesn't say anything against them, he simply says that he isn't inferior to them. We know from 1 Corinthians that one of the factions in the church was loyal to Peter (1 Cor. 1:12). If Paul is defending himself against them then it makes sense that he had to defend his calling since they were called directly by Jesus.

Conversely, Paul also describes his opponents as false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ (2 Cor. 11:13) He would certainly not describe the Twelve in this way.

The explanation this writer is satisfied with is that Paul's opponents falsely associated themselves with the Twelve and used that alleged connection to claim superiority to Paul. So Paul does have to defend his calling against that of the Twelve but it is not the Twelve that he describes as false apostles.

12:14-18. Not a burden. Paul introduced the idea of not being a burden in the previous paragraph. It appears that his opponents had accused Paul of not being worth anything because he didn't expect money from the Corinthians. Paul asks them to consider whether he or any of his companions took advantage of the church.

12:19-21. A method to his madness. Paul did not defend himself merely for his own sake. He knew it was necessary to disabuse the Corinthians of their misconceptions. Their disloyalty to Paul was a symptom of deeper problems in the church.

Throughout this passage Paul warns the church of what could happen when he comes, but he is writing with hope that these issues will be corrected before he arrives. So he lets the church know that he knows what is going on and that it must stop.

One reason many think that these last four chapters are actually a new letter is that in 2 Corinthians 1-9 it appears Paul thinks that the church has effectively addressed his two main concerns from 1 Corinthians, i.e., their factious nature and the sexual immorality that was tolerated. In these last four chapters it seems obvious that Paul knows that this is still a problem.

In terms of sins, some consider those listed in verse 20 are less significant than those in verse 21, but Paul doesn't treat them in this way. They are all indicative of grave problems.

Paul gives the solution to dealing with these sins. Repent! Repentance always means a change for the better, as you turn from that which is wrong and toward that which is good.

13:1-4. The third time's charmed. Acts 18 records Paul's first visit to Corinth when he established the church. The second visit is implied in 2 Corinthians 1:15-2:4. Paul said that he intended to visit Corinth on his way to Macedonia and then stop again on his return. It appears that he made the first stop but from the context it appears that it was a very painful visit and Paul didn't stop again on his return from Macedonia.

Deuteronomy 9:15 says that every accusation must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. In Matthew 18:16 Jesus says to bring one or two others when it is necessary to confront sin. Paul says that three visits are enough for him to have the right to make a judgment.

We can't be sure what Paul would do, and he says that we don't want to find out. Paul has emphasized the crucified Christ as our model of behavior

but there are times when power must be demonstrated. Ananias and Sapphira's fate shows the extreme at which judgment could be experienced in this life. At the least Paul will declare who is right and who is wrong.

13:5-12. Examine yourselves. Again Paul writes that his visit doesn't have to be painful. The Corinthians can examine themselves and correct their bad behaviors.

There's an obvious implication that those who think they are Christians might find out they aren't but it is also obvious that Paul doesn't expect that to happen. Sinful behavior doesn't mean that a person isn't a Christian but a refusal to acknowledge sin and repent would show that the truth isn't in that person.

When Paul tells the Corinthians to examine whether they are living in the faith it appears that he is asking them to look at how they are living. In other words, he wants them to examine their behaviors. In this context it doesn't appear that he is looking at how they became a Christian (i.e., were they baptized, did they receive the Holy Spirit), because he knows that they came into Christ. He also doesn't ask them to examine their doctrine although he did correct doctrinal deficiencies in these letters to the Corinthians.

Paul writes that this is a test for his ministry as well, that the Corinthians are proof of his apostleship. And he seems confident that they can pass the test. He'd rather come to Corinth and find out that all was corrected than to arrive and confirm that he had been right about all of their problems.

He concludes the paragraph by emphasizing that he wants to use his apostolic authority to build up and not to tear down.

13:11-13. Final words. Even with all of the conflict Paul can address the Corinthians as brothers and sisters. The ancient texts simply say "brothers" but modern translations add "and sisters" because that was understood to be included in those days but is deemed better to specify today.

Paul concludes with five brief imperatives:

Put things in order.

Listen to my appeal.

Agree with one another.

Live in peace.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All five demand healthy Christian fellowship. And Paul gives a promise that the God of love and peace will be with them.

Many commentators call the final verse a Trinitarian benediction because it mentions God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Does this benediction support

the Nicene Creed statement that God is a Trinity, one essence existing in three persons?

The most obvious answer is that there is only one who is called God in this verse. Jesus isn't called God nor is the Holy Spirit.

Also, this is the only time the Holy Spirit is mentioned in a greeting or benediction in any of Paul's letters. The greetings always include God and Jesus. Five benedictions only mention Jesus: 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians and Philemon. Three have God and Jesus, Romans, Ephesians and 1 Thessalonians. One can't say that Paul is following a formula when this verse is its only occurrence.

At the same time we must see the truth that Paul is writing, that the grace of God comes to us through Jesus and our fellowship and unity today is through sharing in God's Holy Spirit. The Nicene formula is foreign to scripture but God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are intricately linked in what it means for us to be Christians. This writer thinks it is helpful to think about how God has revealed Himself to us through creation, how He has spoken to us through His son and how He is present today through His Holy Spirit.

Bible Application

Perhaps some of us have heard the words "Just wait until your father gets home". The Apostle Paul didn't want the Corinthians to wait until he arrived. He wanted them to address their issues right now.

In our text today Paul challenged the church to repent and to examine itself. What does this look like?

We'll change the order and begin with the command to "examine yourselves". Where do we start? We can begin with self-examination. Paul listed 11 things he didn't want to find when he arrived:

- Quarreling
- Jealousy
- Anger
- Selfishness
- Slander
- Gossip
- Conceit
- Disorder
- Impurity
- Sexual immorality
- Licentiousness

But we can be blind to our own faults, can't we? The Psalmist didn't trust himself to find everything that needed to be found.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23-24)

Ask God to reveal to you the sin you need to address in your life.

There’s another step for those who really want to make this examination real: ask someone who knows you well how you are doing in these areas.

After identifying sin, it’s time for repentance. What does godly repentance look like? We see a good picture earlier in this letter:

Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance; for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! (2 Cor. 7:9-11)

Godly repentance is marked by a determination to address sin. We confess it is sin, saying that what we did was wrong, and seek to make amends however that is possible.

The idea of making amends might not be familiar but repentance often involves restitution. Restitution for stealing is an obvious form, with a familiar example being Zaccheus who said that if he had defrauded anyone he would repay that one four times as much (Luke 19:8).

But in some areas it’s much more difficult to engage in restitution. For example efforts to undo damage that has been done by sins of the tongue. Still, true repentance will lead us to do what we can.

The problems in 2 Corinthians weren’t simply individual problems. They were problems for the church. The text we just quoted from 2 Corinthians 7 is Paul’s commendation to the church for addressing the sins which were festering within it. Our text today is also a chance for a church to examine itself. The leaders should lead the way, first with self-examination to recognize the beam in one’s own eye (Matt. 7:5) and then as a group to consider the flock.

Life Response

Set aside some time to examine your life. Give yourself some quiet to do so. Work through Paul’s list. Ask God to reveal what you might have missed. Consider asking a trusted person to give you insight.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does a healthy church look like?
2. Why does Paul need to defend himself against the super-apostles?
3. How is the Corinthians' disloyalty to Paul a symptom of deeper problems within the church?
4. What kind of judgment do you think Paul was going to bring to the Corinthian church if it didn't repent of its sins?
5. Why does Paul want the Corinthians to address their sins before he arrives?
6. How might you find that one isn't "in the faith"?
7. Paul gives five commands in verses 11-12 – what would obedience to these commands look like?
8. What important truths do we find in verse 13?
9. How do we examine our lives?
10. How can God search our lives? How do we hear what He finds?
11. What kind of person would you ask to help you in examining your life?
12. What does godly repentance look like?
13. What do you think of the idea that repentance includes restitution?
14. How can a church effectively examine itself?
15. Will you take the time to examine your life?