
2 Corinthians

Lesson 11

“2 Corinthians 9”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of 2 Corinthians in order to understand more fully and completely the call of God for us today as we seek to live out our lives in service to the Kingdom of God, to His glory, His Honor and His will. These ancient texts can challenge us, and inspire us, to live life more fully as participants in God’s story of redemption and love. At the core, the hope and desire for doing this study is that we will be continually transformed more fully and completely into useful instruments in the hands of God for bringing His message of love and compassion, and life to every creature.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate. It is also our hope that each person will bring to the discussion and class times the things that God has placed upon their heart through their unique journey as people seeking the face of God and the life He seeks to bring.

Procedures

1. To explore biblically and logically what matters most to God in order to understand how we are to live. This will entail exploring the background of these texts in order to understand more fully their intended meaning for their original target audience.
2. We will also seek to explore how these ancient texts, addressed to ancient peoples, should, and must challenge us today in our walk of faith and obedience to the will of God.

-
- -
 - 3.** We intend in each instance to offer some practical suggestions as to how the call of God, through His Apostle, Paul, calls us to live our lives in such a way as to reflect our confident hope and expectation in the power of God. We seek the face of God.

Paul continues the encouragement that he began in chapter 8 regarding the collection for the Saints of Jerusalem. In Paul's writings we learn a very valuable lesson about the great need for encouragement, even to a level that we might consider over-doing it. There is perhaps a reason that throughout Scripture people are referred to as sheep.¹ We, like sheep, are in constant need of encouragement, and that encouragement stands here at the forefront of what Paul is giving to the believers at Corinth. In the past, they appear to have expressed a great eagerness to be a part of this relief effort, but perhaps during all the turmoil of their trouble they have become distracted and failed to follow through in this collection. In this section, Paul expresses his encouragement in terms that are extraordinarily gentle, kind, and positive. Perhaps it is the case that he clearly recognizes that this is a tender spot; particularly so with all that has been happening.

He even lets his audience know (verse 2) that their zeal for this effort has acted as an encouragement to the Macedonians, "provoking" (ἠρέθισεν) most of them to participate. They heard about the zeal of the people of Achaia from Paul who has been

¹ Psalm 119:176; Isaiah 53:6; Jeremiah 23:1; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:31; Matthew 10:6; 15:24; Luke 15:6; 1 Peter 2:25.

bragging on them to the believers of Macedonia. Paul wants to tell them of his boasting for more than one reason. One of the reasons is to encourage them, another, is so that they will be ready in case some Macedonians are traveling with Paul, or Titus



when they come to Corinth. In that instance, if the collection in Achaia is not ready, both Paul and the believers of Achaia would be embarrassed. As indicated earlier, in an honor shame society this a very big issue (verses 3-4). According to the ancient Roman rhetorician Quintilian, if someone intends to offer advice regarding revenue, that person should know the character of the audience to whom he offers that advice (3.8.14). I believe Paul knows the character of the people of Achaia. He has a high expectation of their response. He anticipates a very positive response from them and this is expressed in what he writes to them.

It appears to be the case that Paul intends for some representatives from the Macedonian churches to travel with the Jerusalem collection with one of the stopping points along the way being Corinth. This would then entail a considerable journey on to Jerusalem. Paul's credibility had been dealt a serious blow among the believers of Achaia, in part because he had refused to accept patronage from believers at Corinth. This refusal of patronage had led to a variety of suspicions, when Paul's opponents arrived on the scene. Money matters in the ancient church, as they are still today, often create a serious issue between preachers and converts. Because of this tension, and the accusations that have been leveled against Paul, he is taking extra care in order to demonstrate his innocence and his honesty. In talking about this collection Paul is continuing to carry forward with his defense.²

As mentioned previously, a part of the conflict between the believers at Corinth and Paul was due to the fact that he would not allow them to act as patron of his work while among them. In the Greco-Roman world there was a very wide range of complex social

² Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 411-413.

relationships among the people with expectations and rules governing how these relationships were expected to work. In each of these types of relationships there was the expectation of an element of reciprocity. Most of these relationships went under the title “friendship” (*amicitia*), and most involved, in some manner, the transferal of goods, services, funds, or some other form of material benefits in one direction; and most at least involved honor, praise, votes and influence in the other direction. The concern for Paul, in 2 Corinthians, is with reciprocity relationships between people of unequal social status. If Paul takes funds from the people of Corinth he changes his relationship status with them. This will change what is acceptable in their relationship with each other. He will be of a lower social status than his patrons if he takes funds from them.³

The terminology of “friendship” was often used in such patronage relationships to avoid the indelicacy of calling someone a “client,” when in reality this was exactly what the person of lower social status was in such a relationship. Social inferiors were expected to offer praise to their patron either orally, or

³ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, pp. 412-414.

perhaps inscriptionally using the such terms as *patronus*. Such relationship standards would have put Paul in an inferior position among the Corinthians had he allowed it to take place. Such a relationship would have committed Paul to a type of reciprocity that would have bound him to a particular location, while at the same time it would have placed him in a socially inferior position to those acting as his patrons. Such a position would have made the task before Paul much harder, if not entirely impossible and so he avoided it by not allowing them to support him.⁴

If Paul took the role of the itinerant preacher and became the in-house philosopher, or rhetor of a wealthy person he would have had an easier life and not had to work at a trade to support himself. Instead of accepting patronage Paul supported himself by working at a trade. In doing this, Paul was able to avoid the wrong type of reciprocity, that would have restricted his ministry by attaching him to one place and putting him in a socially inferior position that would have made it harder for him to do what was necessary as an Apostle of Jesus Christ.⁵ Paul was always focused on his task as an Apostle of Jesus Christ putting the mission ahead

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, pp. 414-417.

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, p. 417.

of his own comfort and well-being. He works using wisdom that considers first and foremost the kingdom of God and how all can be made to work toward that which is best for the kingdom of God. He is focused, he empties himself, taking on the form of a servant in order that in all things his life might glorify God.

In light of this mission, wisdom, Paul proposes the sending of an advance group to travel ahead of him in order to make sure that everything is prepared for this arrival (verse 3). Titus and his delegation would be the advance team who were sent with the task of insuring that the collection was complete before the others arrived. Notice how Paul strives for excellence in his service of the King. Paul also works to insure that the gift that he expects from the Corinthians is one that is freely given and not in some way extorted (**πλεονεξίαν**) from them. Paul does not desire the money from the people of Achaia as much as he desires the goodwill, the partnership, of the believers at Corinth with other believers, but more importantly for them to partner with God. The only way that such a thing would be possible would be for the gift that they gave to be a voluntary gift that came from the heart. In this way,

the gift that they give would be consecrated by God and be useful for the purposes of God, and His kingdom.

At verse 6, Paul makes it clear that the money that that they would give is seed sown in hope of a rich harvest. The harvest is the hope of what God will make happen and just like all seed that is planted it is God that makes it grow and produce a bountiful harvest. Every farmer knows that if you are going to gain a good harvest one has to sow generously, and with love. At verse 7, Paul calls upon the believers to make up their mind regarding how they will give, not with any sense of reluctance, or under some sense of compulsion. God allows us the honor of partnering with him through what we give, through our act of faith in Him and His mission. The great God of creation allows his children to join Him in His great work of redemption. He allows us to share in His work. This should be both humbling to us and also it should inspire us to do great things as we walk with our Father as partner. Nothing is impossible for God and therefore nothing is impossible for the Children of God. Paul calls upon the believers at Corinth to be “cheerful” (ἡλαρόν) givers. We can be cheerful

when we truly believe that our gift is an act of partnership in God's creation.

Paul is still communicating to the people of Corinth in a context, and in a manner that they would comprehend, within the reciprocity framework. Paul wants them to understand that God is the great patron who has given them a gift that is beyond price and that they should respond in the proper manner as those receiving the patronage of God. They should respond by honoring God, praising God, and now they even have an opportunity to reciprocate by giving of their means. What God has given them was a divine reward of more value than any could have expected, or even hoped was possible. Patronage was not just a matter of economic and social power, it was also a matter of honor and shame. Paul challenges his children, the believers at Corinth, to take the path of honor and demonstrate their gratitude to God by their generosity and faithfulness.⁶

At the end of verse 7, Paul indicates that "God loves a cheerful giver." He returns once again to this element of joy and the attitude that should be a part of the Christian life. There is

⁶ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, pp. 417-419.

much in this little phrase that is attached here. In order to have such a response is to have something that is not merely compelled, or done out of a sense of duty, but as the result of a heartfelt compassion for others that produces a reorientation of how a person views life. Life in Christ becomes focused on seeking opportunities to serve others because in serving others we are in some sense fulfilling our useful, God-given function in the kingdom. Viewing this from the perspective of Paul's original audience, this also gives them an opportunity to fulfill their obligations as the lessor partner in the patronage arrangement in which God has given them so much and promised even more for the future that they can ever give in reciprocity.

In verse 8, Paul lays out exactly this scenario with his audience reminding them of God's ability to provide them with every blessing. So often our perspective on the world is one of "limited" quantity, but with God such a perspective is false. With God there is no limit on anything and certainly not on anything that they would need in order to be participants in the good works that that God places before them. In verse 9, Paul links this way of life and perspective to God Himself who gives generously and

especially gives generously to the poor. In this quotation from Psalm 112:9 Paul ties the giving to the poor with the concept of righteousness. If God is declared righteous because of this then certainly this should also be a trait of the children of God. In the words of Paul here and in the verses that follow Paul is demonstrating both the nature of God to his audience while at the same time weaving in assurances to them with challenges.

Paul is letting his audience know that they will be “enriched” (πλουτιζόμενοι verse 11) in every way as a result of their generosity/sincerity (ἀπλότητα). This is not being set out as some form of business transaction that represents an investment type of relationship of the exchange of goods with the expectation of more goods in return. This is not a promise that if we give away all of our money and possessions, expecting more money and possessions in return that is what we will get. First of all, the element of sincerity is crucial here with the motivation behind the giving being terribly important if not absolutely essential. The gifts must come from a heart of sincerity and such a heart is surely looking beyond the physical pleasure and well-being of the donor. It looks to gain pleasure and satisfaction from truly helping others,

participate with God in an act of redemption and righteousness.

We should be thankful that we as believers are blessed by God with something to give, and something to give that is a part of God's work.

In giving we are expressing not only our acknowledgement of the source of our blessings, but also expressing faith in the source of our security and sense of worth. Giving is an act of worship that expresses our faith, our trust, in God while also expressing our desire to be like Him, to bear His image. It is in reality and expression of “thanksgiving” (εὐχαριστιῶν) to God. We demonstrate our understanding that God is the source of all that we are, and of all that we possess. When we give with a cheerful heart expressing our gratitude and our understanding of the reality expressed by God to His people we demonstrate this understanding. Another aspect that is expressed as being a part of this call for generous, sincere, giving is that it is a “testing/proof” (δοκιμῆς verse 13) of their ministry. Their giving expresses their obedience to the Gospel which proclaims a new creation has begun that links all the people of God one to another. Those at Jerusalem may not have material goods to supply to the

people at Corinth, but they are not without gifts, precious gifts to give. They pray for the believers of Achaia, their brothers and sisters, their family.

Their gift is twofold: first, they long for their brothers and sisters at Corinth and in Achaia. They are all linked together now as the family of God and they long for their fellow family members. In this longing they (verse 14) pray for their family, lifting up to God their cries for their fellow Christians. Their prayers pour forth out of this tremendous sense of gratitude that has come as a result of the “surpassing grace” (ὑπερβάλλουσιν χάριν). The word used here for “surpassing” is the source of our English word “hyperbole.” In Greek this word means “to throw over” or “beyond the mark,” to “overshoot.” The meaning then is that the grace that God has poured out on His children is completely over the top, far more than could have ever been expected, or even dreamt was possible. This is a gift that is “beyond description” (verse 15). In all of this verse you can sense the excitement, the emotion of Paul as he touches on this topic. It is filled with a welling emotion that flows from a heart that is deeply aware of this magnificent and unimaginable gift of grace that God has poured out upon his

children. Paul draws on this imagery and emotion to encourage the people of Achaia to partake even more fully, and richly of this grace that is endless and rich beyond their imaginations. He wants them to know this richness in their hearts with ever-increasing measure so that they can share with him the rapture of God's riches filling the heart and soul with His spiritual blessings.

Synopsis

Paul begins this section working hard to remind and encourage the Christians of Achaia in both the keeping of their desire to participate in poverty relief for the church in Jerusalem and in their walk of faith. He does this gently and with a liberal dose of praise mixed with strong reminders of their previous zeal to participate. He sets his appeal to them in the context of the reciprocity customs that would have been familiar to them. In this he also perhaps deals with one of the issues that had likely been used as a negative against Paul. Paul refused to enter into a patron relationship that would have left him handicapped in his role as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul is willing to endure great hardship, and even risk offending others in order to pursue the mission of God unfettered.

However, Paul does use their understanding of reciprocity relationships in order to set them right with regard to their relationship and obligations to God. They owe God far more than they could ever hope to repay as His gift to them is of unsurpassing value and relevance. In light of this, they are really obligated to praise God and one of the ways that they could do this

and express their faith was to give to those in need. In doing this, their ministry would be validated and they would fulfill at least some of their reciprocity obligations to God.

Paul does all of this in order to draw them into a deeper faith, but also to further seal the breach that he had with them. In addition he wishes for them to continue to experience the richness of righteousness as those who emulate what God does. In this they partake more deeply and richly of the endless grace of God.

Questions

1. What are some of the things you are most proud of? Why?
2. What are some things that you get really excited about? Why?
3. How would you define shame? Is it a good thing, or a bad thing? Why do you think that?
4. What are some things that you have been encouraged to do that at first you did not want to do?
5. What is a promise that you kept that was really hard?
6. Why do you think it is important for people to keep their promises?
7. How do you think giving impacts a person's faith?
8. In what ways is giving a measure of faith?
9. What are some ways that you participate with God's kingdom?
10. What are some ways that we today can supply the needs of the saints?
11. What are some ways that God has blessed you during your lifetime that were unexpected?
12. What are some ways that you express "thanksgiving" to God?
13. How do you see "obedience" as an expression of thanksgiving to God?

14. What are some ways that your faith is tested?

15. What do you think the “indescribable gift” of God is that Paul talks about in 9:15?

16. What are some ways that you encourage others in their walk of faith?