
2 Corinthians

Lesson 15

“2 Corinthians 13”

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.

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 - 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.

As chapter 13 begins, Paul tells his audience that this will now be the third time that he will have come to them. From the content of what is said here Paul intends to deal quite forcefully with any issues that still remain upon his arrival. This section makes it very clear that Paul will deal with “the sinners” (verse 2 **προημαρτηκόσιν**). The word used in verse 2, and translated in the NRSV, and NET, as “sinned previously,” can also mean “failed.” Before making the promise not to spare those who have “failed,” or who have “previously sinned,” Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 19:15 to make it clear that any accusation will be confirmed by the testimony of two, or three, witnesses. This same text is used at Matthew 18:16 in a discussion that is related to church discipline. Again this passage is also alluded to in 1 Timothy 5:19, in the context of accusations made against elders. This would seem to make the case that this concept (of requiring 2, or 3, witnesses for an accusation to be valid) had certainly taken a firm hold among the followers of Jesus.¹

After reading the whole of 2 Corinthians it should perhaps hardly seem surprising that the Corinthian situation required

¹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2009), p. 244.

some form of discipline. Yet, this is an issue (church discipline) that is often quite foreign to most churches in the United States today. Many churches today, under the guise of being grace oriented, and for fear of losing members, or facing a lawsuit, do not officially practice church discipline at all. However, there are, in fact, a variety of Scriptural passages that call for the discipline of erring church members; those that do not live up to the standards of acceptable behavior, or attitude. It is the case that these passages of Scripture lead to the inevitable conclusion that church discipline should be as much a function of a local church today as are: the preaching of the word; the administration of the other duties of the church such as communion, marriage, baptism, and teaching. Church discipline is not an optional extra. Passages such as Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 clearly proclaim the necessity for church discipline.²

Exactly what Paul intended to do at Corinth is a matter of debate among scholars. Some believe that he intends to literally convene a court of sorts and to call witnesses upon his arrival in Corinth. Others propose that his reference to the “second” and

² Jay A. Quine, “Court Involvement in Church Discipline,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 149:593 (1992), pp. 60-73.

“third” visits corresponding to Paul’s visits are in fact what his reference to witnesses is about here. If that is the case, then in the first two visits Paul had warned them about sin, and now on the third visit he will initiate the final stage of witnesses against those who still refuse to repent. Still other scholars believe that there is some kind of combination of Paul’s second visit, and his letters which will lead to a climactic moment of judgment during his third visit.³

As we examine these possibilities it seems hard to fathom any way that Paul would have had enough clout, particularly with his enemies, to actually convene a court and get everyone to participate with him. In light of this, it actually seems much more probable that Paul is talking about his visits and perhaps letters as his witnesses against the Corinthians. He has warned them repeatedly in person, with his first and second visits, and finally it is his intention to deal with them without leniency on his third visit (verse 2). This time, he does not intend to “spare” (φείσομαι) them (the sinners). Exactly what this means is not clear either, with a great diversity of speculation ensuing, as you might well

³ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 244-245.

expect. Some have proposed that Paul intends to excommunicate the troublemakers, excluding them from participation in congregational activities such as the Lord's Supper. Others have proposed that he intends to inflict some form of supernatural consequence upon them such as illness, or even death. Whatever he intends to do, he expects that they will see it as proof of Christ speaking through him (verse 3).⁴ It will in some sense validate the authority of Paul as an apostle who speaks on behalf of Jesus Christ.

Certainly, as we look at what is said here, Paul is not just talking about sinners in some general sense as "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). To clarify, Paul is talking here about "unrepentant sinners," those that are refusing to repent even after multiple warnings. As we examine this issue, it presents unique challenges for the church today. To be certain, one of the prominent issues that Paul is seeking to address, not only in his letters, but also in his visits, is to promote the unity of the church in Corinth. Dividing the church is a critical issue, and particularly important for the church both in the time of

⁴ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 244-245.

Paul, throughout its history, and today. The duty of the church to proclaim the Gospel to all the world would certainly have been strengthened if all through history there would have been unity in the church. A united voice is powerful and compelling. In the prayer of Jesus shortly before his crucifixion he prayed for the unity of the church. The unity of the church and its mission are unbreakably related “so that the world may believe” (John 17:21). This is something that we must always remember. A unified community is a sign of the power of God at work as the normal tendency of human beings is fragmentation and disagreement.

Paul understands this point, and fights fiercely to do everything he can to assist the church in the fulfillment of her destiny. The mark of the church, resting in God’s power, above all else, is shown through a unity with Christ, and this mark also translates into a unity with one another, which then stands as a beacon to the world. In verse 3, Paul is going to talk about “proof” (*δοκιμήν*) that is desired by at least some at the church at Corinth to demonstrate that Paul is indeed the inspired, authorized, spokesman for Christ. One of the negatives of reading Scripture in a language other than Greek is that we do not see some things that

would have clearly stood out to the original audience. One of those things is Paul's usage of the *dokim* family of words. Words from this family of words have been very important in the Corinthian letters. Below is a review of the texts where these words appear: 1 Corinthians 16:3 - **And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve (δοκιμάσητε) with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem.** The implication with regard to this verse as compared with 13:3a may be that they are somehow saying (in the interim between the writing of 1 Corinthians and the writing of 2 Corinthians) that Paul has not proven himself to have the authority to actually "approve" anyone on behalf of Christ. If so, then they are perhaps making the implication at 13:3a that — "Christ is powerful among us [i.e., the Corinthians], but Paul is weak. Therefore, Christ does not speak through him." These Corinthians may have exhibited ecstatic experiences, such as the speaking in tongues, and other such spiritual experiences such as prophesy when they claim that Christ is powerful among them. Conversely, as we have seen, they appear to consider Paul's suffering, imprisonment, and manual labor, as signs of his

weakness that, for them, nullify, rather than ratify his claim that Christ is at work through him.⁵

As we continue with our list of *dokim* passages we have: 2 Corinthians 2:9 - **For this reason also I wrote, so that I might know your tested character (δοκιμήν), if in everything you are obedient.** 2 Corinthians - 8:8. **I do not speak this as a command, but by means of the devotion of others I am testing (δοκιμάζων) the genuineness of your love.** 2 Corinthians 8:22a - **And we sent with them our brother whom we tested (έδοκιμάσαμεν) in many things** 2 Corinthians 9:13. - **Through the test (δοκιμῆς) of this ministry you are glorifying God by the submission of your confession into the gospel of Christ and the sincerity of your partnership with them and with all.**⁶

Paul's past usage of this word family in his correspondence to Corinth helps us to understand his point in using this word family in 13:3-7. The implication in 13:3a is that some of those at Corinth simply do not accept that Christ speaks through Paul. It appears that they may believe that Christ is powerful, but by

⁵ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 245.

⁶ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 245.

comparison and even in contrast Paul is weak. They have “tested” Paul and they perceive that he has failed their test. It appears that they are still viewing the world through their old lens and valuing things that would have been valued under that old Roman system of thought. This, then, is likely to be one of the charges made by the opponents of Paul, that he is weak. It is possible that these Corinthians may be those that have themselves experienced ecstatic experiences such as speaking in tongues, maybe even visions, and other spiritual experiences. By contrast, it may be the case that they perceive Paul’s experiences of imprisonment, manual labor, and suffering to be signs of his weakness and even as a lack of spiritual connection with Christ. Of course Paul, at 12:10, has responded to this charge by declaring that, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” He will return to this argument in 4a and apply this to Christ **“For he (Christ) was crucified in weakness.”**⁷

Still today, even modern interpreters struggle with this concept not accepting the association of “weakness” with the passion of Christ. They seek to rationalize here in these verses, by

⁷ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 245-246.

linking what Paul says here with what is said in Philippians 2:7-9. This however, is likely not the correct interpretation here. Jesus made the choice to love all people and invite them to share in the New Creation as beloved children of God. This reflects the conscious choice on the part of Christ to resist evil and violence with love rather than with violence and force. For many, even to this day, such nonviolent resistance is perceived as weakness and as making a person vulnerable. Surely, this is actually what God did; he made Himself vulnerable in Christ. In modern times, the salt miners in India, at the instigation of Gandhi, were beaten, but did not respond in kind to their British attackers. During the civil rights activities of Martin Luther King Jr., activists were beaten back with water hoses, clubs, police dogs, guns, and even bombs. Those under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. did not respond in kind. They chose instead to follow the way of Christ, who was crucified by Roman Imperial power, but did not respond in kind with force and violence.⁸ As the Son of God He certainly could have done so, had He so chosen.

⁸ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 246.

It is certainly possible for people to judge that those who would allow themselves to be beaten without responding in kind, are weak and even pitiful. However, we are aware that these people bore a powerful and lasting witness for a different way, a new way, the way of Christ which is to value love and life over force and violence. Jesus was crucified in weakness and yet he “lives by the power of God.” His love made him vulnerable and opened him up to death and pain.⁹ It is in these acts that trust, faith, in God, is overwhelmingly expressed. Just as when Abraham was prepared to offer Isaac because he reasoned that God could raise him back from the dead; so too Christ believed that God could, and would, raise him back from the dead. In reality, this that is perceived as weakness, taps into the greatest power that exists, the power of God. In verse 4, this is what Paul is calling his audience to understand. This is the context for the life of Paul as it was for the life of his Lord and Savior Christ Jesus.

As in 4:7-11, where Paul wrote that he holds the treasure of the Gospel in the “clay jar” of his body he recognizes that it is in this way that the Gospel message is most clearly, and purely,

⁹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 246.

portrayed. Paul was weak like Jesus was weak, and at the same time he was powerful like Jesus was powerful because he trusted not in his own strength and resources, but in the power of God. It is in the midst of such weakness that the power of God is most clearly portrayed in the life of the faithful. It is in the midst of such faith that the power of God brings forth life in the midst of the faith (trust) of those who choose the way of Christ over the way of the world. In the midst of all of this we are left with the question then of what Paul intends to do in “dealing” with the Corinthians in some fashion? Of course the great desire of Paul is that he does not have to deal with anyone in Corinth with this power from God. His hope is that they will turn and repent of their sins and therefore there will be no need for such proof.¹⁰ At the end of the day we can only speculate as to what Paul intended to do in order display his authority.

At 13:5, Paul challenges his audience to “Test yourselves to see if you are living in the faith.” Here Paul turns the tables on the Corinthians who had wanted proof that Paul actually spoke for Christ. This verse calls the Corinthians to be introspective and to

¹⁰ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 246-247.

deeply, and carefully, examine themselves. He calls them to recognize the reality of their call of discipleship. He wants them to ask themselves if they truly are disciples of Christ after all. He wants them to put themselves to the “test” (πειράζεστε). In this instance Paul once again steps into his role as their spiritual father. This is a call that all who follow Christ should answer and this should be something that is not only daily before the disciple, but constantly. Here Paul will indicate that there is the potential to fail in this testing and to be “unacceptable,” “unqualified,” or “worthless” (ἀδόκιμοί). Some have seen the “test” that Paul calls upon his audience to undergo as some form of doctrinal test, but faith for Paul is most often about the way a person lives not just what they believe on a doctrinal level. For Paul a life of faith is one that **demonstrates** a trust in God’s grace and **demonstrates** this by living in response to that grace in a demonstrable life of faith.¹¹

In the context here it seems that Paul may be asking his audience if they trust God and love others the way that Jesus did? This seems to be indicated by his follow-up question which challenges them “to recognize,” “to know,” (ἐπιγινώσκετε) that

¹¹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 247.

Jesus Christ is “in” them. In this, Paul challenges them to be weak as Christ was weak and to express their power in the way that Jesus expressed his power, rather than in some form of self-promoting and judgmental manner. Certainly this will have been Paul’s experience from them (they had judged Paul and found him lacking). The last clause of verse 5 surely carries with it a certain amount of irony. Surely Paul, who has spent so much time and energy on these people, does not anticipate that they will actually “fail to prove” themselves to truly be followers of Christ? He does however, leave this possibility open. He leaves them with the challenge to prove themselves.¹²

At verse 6, he states this possibility of failure openly, but surely with the hope that they will indeed realize that Christ is within them and that they will start acting like it. The structure of verse 7 is somewhat convoluted. It literally reads, “But we pray to God not to do nothing evil, not that we might appear approved, but in order that you may do good, even if we are unacceptable.” Basically, the message of Paul here is that he wants the Corinthians to succeed more than he desires the vindication of

¹² Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 247.

himself. In verse 8, Paul indicates once again his trustworthiness in a verse about the truth. In verse 9 Paul puts the welfare of his audience ahead of his own needs and thus demonstrates for them (the Corinthians and Achaeans) the attitude that they should have in Christ of putting the needs and welfare of others ahead of ones own self. He desires for them to truly become mature, to become fully adequate (κατάρτισιν) as followers of Christ.

In verse 10, Paul indicates his purpose in writing these things is in order that when he comes to them he will not have to deal harshly with them in using the power (ἐξουσίαν) that has been given him. That power has been given for “building up” and not to be used as a weapon of destruction (καθαίρεσιν). At verse 11, Paul begins closing out his letter and leaves them with a few parting requests. He appeals to them to “rejoice,” to “set things right,” to “be encouraged” to “be mindful,” or “thoughtful” of one another and to live in peace. He tells them that if they will do these things then the “God of love and peace” will be with them. He challenges them in verse 12 to greet one another with a holy “kiss” (φιλήματι). There is nothing erotic about this kiss, it is meant to be an expression of the love of a brother for a brother


and is indeed a cognate of the word for brotherly love like in the name of the city of Philadelphia. It is meant to be an expression of special affection and appreciation.

At the end of verse 12 Paul tells them that all the “holy ones” (the saints) greet them and then at verse 13 he leaves them with a “grace” a call for blessing from Jesus for them. He asks for them to have the “grace” of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the “fellowship” (ἡ κοινωνία) of the “holy spirit” to be with them all. Thus Paul ends this magnificent and powerful letter that contains within it many powerful and poignant lessons as he challenges them to become the image of Christ. He challenges them to live a life of true discipleship, to truly live a life that reflects their trust and belief in Jesus Christ. The call of Paul to the people still echoes to us today as we continue to face many of the same challenges that the people of Corinth and Achaia faced. We are challenged to value what Christ valued, to react the way Christ reacted and to live as Christ lived. We are called to be true disciples of Jesus Christ.

Synopsis

From the start of this letter it has been clear that Paul is deeply concerned for the church at Corinth and in the province of Achaia. Paul has sought to reason with his audience throughout this work and draw them to accept his leadership and his teachings for them. As he draws this letter to a close his warnings become extremely stern and serious, with him threatening to discipline them following a procedure dating back at least to the time of the Israelites under Moses (requiring 2 or 3 witnesses). Even in the midst of this warning, of the pending judgment, he continues to try to persuade them to repent and turn toward the truth. He challenges their perception of the world and what is to be valued and perceived as of Christ. So often what they had seen as power was counter to the life and teaching of Jesus, who came in order to demonstrate the power of God even in the midst of His vulnerability. Paul indicates that his treatment of those that fail to turn, to repent, will be neither lenient, and it will indeed provide proof of God's power.

Paul calls upon his audience to examine themselves to ascertain whether they are truly living by faith. He challenges



them to recognize that if they pass this test Christ is actually “in” them. He prays that they will respond correctly and do what is right. Even in the midst of this appeal he indicates both that “truth” exists, and that they cannot do anything against “truth.” He challenges them to become “fully qualified” and not to make him use the power that has been given to him to destroy as it was intended for “building up.” He wants them to put things in order and even as he gives his parting words he calls for the blessings of God to be upon them even in the midst of challenging them to “agree with one another” and to “live in peace.” He calls them to community that is centered, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Thus Paul ends this letter to his beloved children indicating that he continues to fight for them and hope for them.

Questions

1. What are some things that you see as authoritative in teaching you how life should be lived, and perceived?
2. How would you define sin?
3. How do you think the church should deal with those who fail to live a life of penitent respect for God?
4. For you, what is proof of the authority to speak on behalf of Christ?
5. What are some things that you see as signs of weakness? Why?
6. What does the power of God look like to you? Why?
7. Why do you think Paul calls upon his audience to “test” themselves?
8. Should we test ourselves in similar ways today? Why, or why not?
9. When Paul speaks of Jesus Christ being in “you” does he mean individually, or corporately? In verse 5 all the pronouns and verbs are plurals.
10. What do you think it means for a person to “fail the test” as Paul talks about failing at verse 5?
11. Do you know people who have “failed the test?” If so, how do you know they have failed?
12. What is the truth that Paul speaks of in verse 8?

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13. What are some ways that you are equipping yourself to serve Christ?
 14. How do you come to agreement with other people?
 15. How do you live in “peace?”
 16. What are some ways that you experience the “love of God?”
 17. How do you know if you have “fellowship with the Holy Spirit?”
 18. What is the most important lesson that you will take away from 2 Corinthians? Why?