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# 2 Corinthians

## Lesson 3

### “2 Corinthians 2”

**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.

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**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.

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#### 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 2 begins Paul is still very much in defensive mode, this will indeed continue through 7:4. He is explaining to the Corinthians why he has not visited them earlier and his explanation is, that it was for their benefit that he did not come to them. Continually Paul directs the Corinthians away from a self-centered, self-focused perspective toward a Christ-centered, other centered focus. He does not just do this with words only, but in his actions. He connects the two concepts in a manner that is meant to convey a powerful message to these young Christians. At the heart of the Christian message is thinking of others, loving others, by sacrificing one's own rights, and privileges in service of the needs and welfare of others. Paul does not just convey this message in his words, but uses his words to explain his motivations for his actions. In this way, the message of the Gospel is proclaimed in word and in deed both. This was a connection that God had been trying to continuously make throughout the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 29:13 - **The sovereign master says, "These people say they are loyal to me; they say wonderful things about me, but they are not really loyal to me. Their worship consists of nothing but man-made ritual.** NET. Mark 7:6 - **He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied correctly about you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.** NET

Paul in verse 2 continues expressing the vision he has for the church as a community. Paul is not just expressing to this church community what he can and is doing for them, but also his expectations for that community. Community is never a one way street, if it is, then it is not really community. Paul expresses his hopes, his desires, his needs, to this community of faith. He needs this community and this need is not just for him personally, but it is important as an element of fulfilling his mission to God. When community is not working the way it should and must, then the mission suffers and ultimately the proclamation of the Gospel message suffers. That is at least one aspect of what Paul is trying to get across to this audience. If all of his energy and effort is consumed by the inward struggles of the community then there is little, or no energy, or effort, still left for the outward focus of the Gospel message. Church is a community with a mission and that mission drives the activities, the energy, the focus, and the shape of that community. If it does not fulfill its mission, then it is failing to fulfill the destiny to which it has been called by God.

Notice in verse 3 how Paul changes the focus toward the element of “joy” (χαρά). Henry Close says of joy that, “Joy

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represents the most intimate and significant aspect of life, the point at which a person is most vulnerable, the point at which, he, or she can be most easily embarrassed, or humiliated.”<sup>2</sup> Paul in verses 3 and 4 of this chapter opens up his heart and soul to his audience and exposes his vulnerability and challenges the heart of his audience at the same time. If they choose to take advantage of his vulnerability at this point they expose the nature of their own hearts. That would then expose their motives for acting in the way that they have been acting. So, while Paul exposes his vulnerability he also proclaims the Gospel message of loving others sacrificially the way Christ did in a powerful manner not only in his words, but in his explanation of his deeds. Paul makes himself vulnerable in the way Christ made Himself vulnerable (Philippians 2:5-8).

In verse 4, Paul lets the Corinthians know how deeply he loves them. He uses here the Greek word (ἀγάπη) that connotes a love that is more of what we might call a covenant love. This is a love that comes from a deep commitment to be willing to sacrifice oneself because of making this covenantal commitment such as in

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<sup>2</sup> Henry T. Close, “The Experience of Joy,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 35:3 (1981), pp. 177-187.

marriage, or as was made between God and Abraham in Genesis 15:18. Today, in our culture, this type of commitment has become so often the rare exception rather than the norm. Paul is using language here in 2 Corinthians 2 that indicates how deeply and passionately he feels for the people of Corinth. This is a passion that comes not from some mere feeling, or passing emotion, but is rooted in a deep and abiding commitment that he has for these dear people. He is trying to lay a strong foundation of care and concern. If this deep love is what he has for them then their relationships with each other should also be built upon this same foundational principal.

At 2:5 Paul shifts to the fact that someone in the church at Corinth may have caused his previous visit to be painful. It appears that as we unpack this verse that this individual grieved not only Paul, but the whole community. From the few words given here we may surmise that there was some individual who was likely a key person in the community, who directly and publicly caused Paul grief. The text of verse 5 actually indicates that the “grief,” or “pain” (λελύπηκεν) was aimed directly at Paul. The first person pronoun that Paul uses in verse 10 (“what I have

forgiven ...”) would certainly leave the clear impression that Paul was the party that was wronged and therefore the one who had something to forgive. The individual who caused the grief to Paul appears to have been an insider, i.e. someone from within the Corinthian church itself. This seems much more probable than that it was a traveling preacher who had come to Corinth. Part of this can be ascertained by the fact that the community would not have been as well situated to punish an outsider; they would instead have more likely just sent him away.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, whoever this person was he appears to have had considerable clout as he mounted considerable opposition for Paul. This would indicate that this person had considerable influence within the community of Corinth. Paul devotes a substantial amount of ink to the grief caused by this person (2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 7:11-12). There is little else that we can say without merely speculating in a manner that takes us far beyond the evidence available to us. All we can say with a certain degree of certainty is that this person was a significant member of the community. If a person picks up some older commentaries (prior

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<sup>3</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), p. 41.

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to the twentieth century) one might find the spurious connection of this person with the man who had become sexually involved with his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). It is clear that the individual here in chapter 2 caused grief that was very public rather than personal and private. This fact is indicated by the fact that Paul does not have to explain to the community what he is talking about. They knew what had happened, because it was all very public and out in the open.<sup>4</sup> It therefore does not make sense that this person and the man who was sexually involved with his stepmother are the same person.

In verses 6 and 7, Paul calls upon the Corinthians, who have in some way punished this person, to now “forgive and console him.” They are asked to do this so that he will not be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” The wording used here is such that the idea is put forward that the potential exists that this person could literally be swallowed up by an excessive amount of grief. They are now, verse 8, challenged to reaffirm their love for him. Have you ever had a conflict with another person and then gone back and mended fences? This is often very difficult as the

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<sup>4</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 41-42



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emotions and the blame gets in the way of forgiveness and compassion. It is perhaps in these moments that our faith is tested the most. Do we really believe, and understand what Christ has done for us? He died for us while we were yet enemies.<sup>5</sup>

It is perhaps in this moment when we have the greatest opportunity to shine like a beacon in the darkness as everything within us cries out against reconciliation until conditions are met. The voice of the enemy speaks loudly and powerfully into such situations as this and drives wedges and creates division. Those voices call us to seek justice, retribution, and some sense of sorrow on the part of the one who has wronged others. Such forgiveness is perhaps never harder when the wrong is perceived to be against those we love such as a spouse, a child, a father, or a mother. Paul seems to allude to this as he moves to verse 9 where he writes: **For this reason also I wrote you: to test you to see if you are obedient in everything.** NET. Notice this element of testing. Just as Abraham was tested and as Jesus was tested in the wilderness so too we are tested.

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 5:10 - **For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, since we have been reconciled, will we be saved by his life?** NET

The question is will we be obedient? Obedience is a subject that does not appeal much to us today, perhaps it never did, but it is important to God and a hallmark of His people. Jesus states it like this in John 14:15: **“If you love me, you will obey my commandments.** NET. Jesus clearly links “love” with obedience. So often in our world we (people of the United States) view all of our relationships through the eyes of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, **that all men are created equal**, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” In this we fail to recognize that this is only a right because it is something that comes from the “creator.” We are in no way equal to our creator, nor do we have any rights to challenge, or argue with him. We are called instead to “obedience.” In obedience we express our love, our humility, our faith, and our understanding of the order of the universe. God is God and we are not. The Corinthian church needed this lesson and so do we today.

Paul then moves into verse 10 of 2 Corinthians laying out a powerful principle that must be a hallmark of the church, the

power to forgive. Notice how Paul challenges them to forgive. He challenges them to forgive amongst themselves recognizing that the ripples of forgiveness permeate the whole and are a part of the total picture. Paul tells them that if they forgive a person then he also forgives them, but that is not all, he does it for their sake in the very presence of Christ. Paul then links this teaching powerfully to the idea that somehow not forgiving is part of the design of Satan, “the accuser.” So often for us the word “Satan” has become nothing more than a name. It has lost its original meaning and potency. This is a word used to describe one who “accuses.” He is the great accuser of mankind. In Job 1:6-9<sup>6</sup> notice how Satan stands as the accuser of Job in the very presence of God challenging God’s perception of Job. How often do we stand in alignment with Satan, rather than with God?

Paul calls us to be aware of the “thoughts” (νόημα), “understanding,” “designs,” of Satan. Satan has a plan and he does all that he can to recruit us into his plans and thoughts. We need

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<sup>6</sup> One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. <sup>7</sup> The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the LORD, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” <sup>8</sup> The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” <sup>9</sup> Then Satan answered the LORD, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” NRSV.


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to have the “mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). Paul is going to speak several times in 2 Corinthians about the mind. Our mind is crucial. It is part of God’s great gift to mankind. It is perhaps too one of the things that represents our bearing the image of God.

We must have our head in the fight, or the fight is over and Satan will win. That is his design and if he can divide us and destroy us by corrupting our minds he will certainly do so. He often convinces us that Christ’s forgiveness only covers certain sins and certain people and others are for some reason unforgivable.

There are times too, perhaps in the wee hours of the night that he places doubts in our own hearts and minds as to where we stand before God. He is the great accuser and he challenges us to never know certainty nor to have confidence. Paul challenges us to see past this scheme of Satan and to rely upon the presence of Christ with a certainty and an assurance that rooted deeply in the love of Christ.

Paul shifts gears slightly in verses 12 and 13 when he seeks once more to defend himself against false accusations. He tells them why he stayed only for a short time at Troas. It was not because he was double-minded, or fickle in some way. He did not



stay long in Troas because of his concern for his dear brother in the faith, Titus. Paul travelled to Macedonia out of his deep concern for Titus. Have you ever been so deeply concerned for another that your spirit was troubled and there was nothing better to do than just go and search for that person. Now we even have apps for that on our phone. Paul perhaps could have used one to keep track of Titus. Some speculate that it was Titus that was sent to Corinth with the painful letter that Paul wrote to Corinth. If that is so, Paul knew this letter would cause hurt and pain and so he was not just anxious about Titus, but desired news regarding the church at Corinth and how they had responded to the letter.

In 2:14, Paul enters into one of his digressions that are so full of beauty, power, and emotion. Some see this as a break that is so severe that it means that some other material has been inserted into the letter here. Such expectations are unrealistic and reaching for controversy when none exists. Paul is known for such rambling breaks in his writings and we must realize that editing was far harder than it is in our own time with the advent of computers. Paul's great mind has a thought and it is recorded lest

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it be lost. What a great thought it is too. These words have powerfully motivated and inspired so many. Paul breaks out in verse 14 into praise and thanks to God, who in Christ always leads them in a triumphal procession. Such a procession is perhaps something like when one of our sports teams wins a championship and the whole community turns out to welcome them home as victorious conquerors.

Paul even alludes to the aroma, perhaps thinking of the incense that was often burned as part of processions of victory in the ancient world. Sometimes we want to have just one option for what Paul was thinking, but sometimes the power of imagery is that it provokes a variety of images in the minds of the readers. The imagery of Paul here is powerful and evocative; it is linked to the concept of knowing Christ. Clearly what Paul conceives of is far more than simply knowing who Jesus is, it relates to the idea of living life in a way that reflects an understanding of the reality of who he is as it relates to the church and the church's mission before God. As they live out the reality of Christ's life they are challenged by the concept that they are an aroma to the world.

Verse 16 indicates the dynamic nature of this aroma. This witness is not going to be pleasing to everyone. For those who are being saved indeed it is a pleasing aroma, but to those who are perishing this is the aroma of death. When we see the reaction of the world to the witness of Christian living it should not be a surprise that some see that life as repugnant and distasteful. For some, those perishing, such a life is reminder of death and dying. It smells like death to one, while to those who are being saved the aroma is sweet and pleasant. Paul, in the latter part of verse 16 expresses the feeling of inadequacy for such a role in the world. He is not here advocating a view of the superiority of Christians over others through any understanding of their own personal merit or worthiness. He also wants the Corinthians to understand that Christians are not like salesman peddling wares that they may, or may not, believe in.

Christians speak the words of the Gospel not out of some sense of personal gain, but because they sincerely believe it is the truth. They do it because they are people sent from God with this message. This is the vocation, the task for which the life of the Christian is lived. This is their purpose for existence. Their

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message comes from a sincerity that is motivated by a purity that is rooted in the understanding of what Christ came to accomplish. Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost, to rescue the perishing. Paul calls for the Corinthians to live life as if they are standing in the very presence of God Himself. This is in fact a reality, we all do stand continuously in the presence of God. Whether we forget that fact, or delude ourselves into thinking that God has more important things to do than that the reality is that we all stand continuously in the sight of God.

In this section, 2 Corinthians 2:14-7:4, Paul will launch even more fully into a great defense of his ministry and of himself. The defensive mode of Paul will continue throughout this section. The Corinthians need to understand the purity of Paul's motives in order that they might learn to follow Paul as he follows Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). In Paul's words there is a constant message to focus on Christ and how he lived his life and how he would respond to their current situation. Paul uses his relationship with the people of Corinth to teach them about how powerful motives are. Without the proper motives the message becomes tainted and corrupt. Paul wants them to understand his motives are



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rooted powerfully and firmly in Christ and His mission. He challenges them to do the same. If they do, unity will replace division, and ill feeling will be replaced by a powerful love, the love of Christ.

Paul in this section focuses attention continually on Christ and the mission of the church. All that an individual is, is to become subservient to the mission of God and this mission is to be carried out in the midst of the community called by God for this task. They are to unleash the compassion of God onto the world as his spirit-filled, spirit-directed, community. As they pursue God no other outcome can truly be available to a community of people that have truly seen the love of Christ.

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# Synopsis

Paul, in this chapter, continues in his defensive mode and will continue for several chapters to come. He will use his defense to teach the Corinthians about pure and proper motivations. He also teaches them powerful lessons regarding the importance of community and supporting each other. Paul understands how important that support is and that in community love can be, must be, powerfully expressed. In his vulnerability Paul demonstrates the power of Christ and indeed the purity of his own motives in his actions. This in turn challenges his audience to look to the nature of their own motives.

Starting in 2:5 Paul turns to the issue of pain and punishment. He links these two things powerfully with forgiveness and calls on the Corinthians to forgive the one who has been punished. More than that, he calls upon them to love this person, thus affirming the purpose of the punishment was never merely to be punitive, but was intended to be an act of love. So often today we fail to see that love can at times be best expressed in punishment. It all depends on the motives and the anticipated outcome on the part of the ones punishing. Paul indicates that

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obedience is important too. This too is a concept that has often been seen as something old-fashioned and unloving and yet it is exactly here that Jesus links them together. Love and obedience are integrally linked. Paul also talks about how continuing to accuse and not forgiving are part of the plan of Satan. Satan loves it when we fail to forgive and continue to stand in the role of accuser. When we do this we align ourselves with him and not with God.

Paul at verse 14 breaks into what can only be described as a song of praise, thanking God. He speaks of the fact that God has made his followers to be a fragrant aroma to those who are being saved while to those who are perishing they are the aroma of death. He acknowledges that none of this comes from the person, but is something that comes from God. In the final words of this chapter Paul challenges them to be people of sincerity, as people sent from God. He challenges them to do all things as if they are standing in the very presence of God Himself.

In all of this Paul calls them to be a community bound to one another in forgiveness, love and purity.

# Questions

1. What are some things that make you defensive? Why?
2. Why do you think Paul finds it important to defend himself as he does in this chapter?
3. What do you think Paul hopes to teach the Corinthians in his defense of himself?
4. Why do you think words and deeds should be in alignment? What difference does it make? Can you give some examples?
5. Why do you think Paul mentions joy in 2:3?
6. What does Paul's joy say about his personality?
7. How would you define love?
8. Why do you think someone might need to be punished by a group?
9. What is the goal of punishment in Paul's thinking, in this chapter?
10. How would you explain forgiveness to someone who had never heard of the concept?
11. Why do you think Satan would not want people to forgive one another?

12. How does forgiveness relate to Christ?
13. What do you think Paul means by challenging the Corinthians not to be outwitted by Satan?
14. What does it mean for someone to be an accuser?
15. How does it appear that the church in Corinth is siding with Satan in accusing Paul of improper motives and in being excessively harsh to the one being punished?
16. What do you think it means to be the aroma of Christ?
17. What does it mean for a person to have “pure motives,” or to be sincere?
18. What do you think it will be like to stand in the presence of God? Why?
19. What is the most important thing you will take away from what Paul says here in chapter 2 today?