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# 2 Corinthians

## Lesson 7

### “2 Corinthians 6”

**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.

At chapter 6 Paul begins a third subunit of this current section with a very direct appeal to the Corinthians “not to accept (δέχομαι) the grace of God in vain.” Paul sets this section powerfully in the context of he and his companions “working together” (Συνεργοῦντες). Paul does not specifically indicate here who he means his audience to understand that they are working together with, but we are surely meant to understand that Paul and his companions are working together with God (1 Corinthians 3:9). Some modern versions of the Bible (NRSV, NIV) clarify this fact, but it seems very likely that Paul wanted to leave this ambiguity here to challenge the Corinthians to consider their partnership in the ministry (it is best to leave the ambiguity here).<sup>1</sup> In many places it is good to clarify, but sometimes when we are too specific we are excluding information and possibilities that are intended to be left in place. This would appear to be one of those places where specificity hinders, rather than helps.

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<sup>1</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, in the Smyth & Helwys Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2009), p. 121.

In the beginning of this letter (1:4) Paul stressed the “comfort/console” aspect of the term παρακαλέω (parakaleō)<sup>2</sup>, here, however, he stresses the “encourage/exhort” aspect of this word’s meaning.<sup>3</sup> Paul powerfully, and forcefully stresses the element of community here in this verse. He also stresses something important about “grace” (χάρις), you see “grace” by its very nature pushes us to go outside of our selfishness and outside of our comfort zone. When we truly take into ourselves the grace of God we cannot help but be changed. Grace is intended to heal our souls and mend our selfish eyes so that we can begin to see the world in the way God does and the way God intended us to see things. It calls us to live in community and to recognize the importance of community. Community is crucial to Paul’s point here as it is a part of the proclamation of the Gospel. God chooses

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<sup>2</sup> “Paul’s Use of *Parakaleō* Thus Far in the Letter

1:4 . . . the One who *consoles* (parakaleō) us upon our every affliction so that we are able to *console* those in every affliction through the consolation with we ourselves are being *consoled* by God.

1:6 If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being *consoled*, it is for your consolation . . . .

2:7 . . . on the other hand so that you may forgive and *console*, that such a person may not be drowned by excessive grief.

2:8 Therefore, I *encourage* (parakaleō) you to reaffirm love for him.

5:20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ as from God who *consoles/encourages* (parakaleō) through us . . . .

6:1 And working together [with whom?] we *encourage* (parakaleō) you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” in Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 121.

to work in community among His people because He Himself lives in community Himself as a triune God. Paul calls the Corinthian church to recognize this aspect of God and the Gospel in all that he says and all that he does. Paul, even in his ministry, serves in community with God and with others.

Paul will continue stressing this concept of working in community with God as we move into verse 2 where Paul quotes from Isaiah 49:8 to heighten his appeal. Isaiah's "acceptable time" is now, in the context of Paul's writing. Isaiah's "day of salvation" is happening right now for the Corinthians. The word of the prophet has been fulfilled in the work that is being done through Jesus Christ. The emphasis of Paul here is not to miss this opportunity. Paul is pleading with them to recognize this before it is too late.<sup>4</sup> Paul is making it clear that, with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the advent of the Messianic age has begun. The prophecy of Isaiah has thus been fulfilled.<sup>5</sup> Paul makes it clear to his audience that the things prophesied by Isaiah are here now, and there is no further need for waiting, or hoping for something

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<sup>4</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, vol. 40 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), p. 78.

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additional, these prophecies have come to pass, they have come into reality.

At verse 3, Paul in a straightforward, and unapologetic manner commends his ministry as not putting any obstacle in the way of people accepting it. He and his companions are bragging of this fact, of not placing obstacles in people's way, and then he goes on to spell out more specifically what he means by this in verses 4 and 10. Their commendation before God comes from their great endurance. This great endurance is something that has been demonstrated in "hardships, afflictions and calamities, beatings, imprisonments..." and more. Some commentators believe that Paul is here resorting to hyperbole,<sup>6</sup> but this would seem to me to be entirely counterintuitive here where Paul is speaking specifically of things like "truthful speech" (verse 7). Chrysostom describes Paul's onslaught here as a "blizzard of troubles." This section seems filled with emotion as Paul pours out, in an almost rapid fire fashion, all that is happening in his life all the way through verse 10.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, p. 172.

Paul here resorts once again to using a rhetorical tactic to get his point across to his audience and provide them with evidence of his ethics and character. Paul lists a series of hardships in three groups with three hardships listed in each of the three groups. These are hardships that Paul and his companions have undergone (verses 4b-5). The catalog of hardships that he gives here bear a striking resemblance to a similar list found in the writings of Achilles Tatius 5.18.4-5 (who was an early 2nd century Christian Bishop from Alexandria). In this list of hardships Paul has “opened his mouth wide” and in doing this he shares feelings, attitudes, desires, exhortations and even his circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Paul’s usage of this technique shows several things, it shows that this would not have been something unexpected, or unanticipated for his audience. He was using common literary conventions for his day. Today they may seem somewhat strange to us, but they were not strange for the time and the place where Paul was writing.

Rhetoricians (those that study rhetorical techniques) would remind us to pay attention to the first and last elements in

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<sup>8</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 390-401.


rhetorical lists like those that Paul uses here. First place, in Paul's list goes to "great endurance" (ὕπομονή πολλή). This particular word (ὕπομονή) can mean "endurance, steadfastness, staying power, consistent resistance, or commitment to one's cause." In apocalyptic contexts this is a word that does not in any way denote passivity (like the English word "endurance" might suggest). Rather, in such contexts this word denotes actively resisting evil and expresses a full commitment to God. Paul had endured afflictions, beatings and even imprisonment (along with other things), but in the midst of all of this he persisted in actively pursuing his gospel ministry and actively resisting any temptation to cease and desist from his activities.<sup>9</sup> Paul was not passive in his resistance of evil or in his pursuit of the task which God set before him.

The last element in Paul's list is the paradoxical claim that he was "as having nothing and possessing everything" (verse 10). This phrase very likely speaks first of Paul's concrete economic situation. In other words he was flat broke. He chose to live a life without patrons sponsoring his work. He likely had no sponsoring

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<sup>9</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 123.





church. He relied upon the support of his fellow believers (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:9), and perhaps what he could make as a tentmaker (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:8-18). As the result of doing ministry in this way sometimes Paul went hungry (Verse 5), but in his ministry he was beholding to no one but God, and so he proclaimed the Gospel message with full freedom and with the full expression that God called him to as an apostle of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> This section lays out really frankly the heart of Paul and in the next section he will tell them this very thing at verse 11.

In verse 11 Paul alerts us to the fact that he is bringing an end to this part of the letter and his defense of himself, and the defense of his apostolic ministry. He clearly believes that what he has said thus far is sufficient to affect the communities' relationship with him, but in the words that follow he makes his intent explicit and emphatic. In the culture of the day the usage of "frank speech" was a sign of friendship and closeness. Beyond this expression of friendship and closeness expressed by his usage of "bold speech" Paul also expresses his affection for the people of Corinth and Achaia telling them that there is "no restriction in our

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<sup>10</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 123.

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affections.” He does however indicate, very frankly, that he does believe there is a restriction of affections on their part toward him and his companions. In verse 13 he challenges them, as if they were his children; here Paul takes up again, very prominently, the role of father, to open their hearts wide as he and his companions have done toward them (the Corinthians).<sup>11</sup>

Then abruptly, at verse 14, Paul makes one of his famous shifts, he will pick up the conversation he began in verse 13 again at 7:2. His sharp command at verse 14 is that they not be mismatched with unbelievers. This command is one of the most controversial and perhaps misapplied of all that Paul wrote. A number of scholars just want to totally discard this section altogether as not being of Paul (an easy out). Others want to separate it out, and either frankly state that they do not believe it belongs here, or the way they deal with this passage totally rips it from its contextual moorings and sets it adrift on the winds of the preacher’s fancy. As Peter said of the writings of Paul “some things are hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:15b-3:16). A better way than these options is to look at the context of the passage and

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<sup>11</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 129.

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allow that context to determine our interpretation of this passage of Scripture.<sup>12</sup> Never has any manuscript evidence been found without this text in this place.

One of the things that is perhaps a mark of our age and our modern Western mindset is a desire for specificity. Often we desire this when it is not only not possible, but also at times when it is actually undesirable. The theories expounded on Paul's meaning here have led some to a sense of despair and confusion while others have expressed a confidence of interpretation that is nothing short of being miraculous in its surety. When we approach Scripture it is seldom the case that we can have a confidence in understanding and comprehension that unequivocally excludes any and all other interpretations. I have heard it said that God says what He means and means what he says and while there is truth in this statement it is not "the truth." A part of this statement that is missing is our hearing of what God says, and that is often, if not always imperfect: in comprehending the fullness of all that God would have us understand we fail because of our weakness not His. That is at least one of the

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<sup>12</sup> Donald G. McDougall, "Unequally Yoked - A Re-Examination of 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:4," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 10:1 (1999), pp. 113-137.

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reasons that we do not read Scripture one time and then never need read it again because we have its message clearly embedded in our souls. We are not capable of having full and perfect comprehension in our sinful nature and one of the beautiful things about Scripture is that our understanding of it is most often enhanced by probing and looking at in with others to see new facets that have actually been there all along, but we were too deaf, or at the wrong angle to hear and comprehend.

Our passage here, at 2 Corinthians 6:14 and following, has been the subject of a great variety of speculation and often this speculation has led at least some to conclude that what is said here does not apply to them and so there is a smug sense of self-satisfaction. I believe that if we properly understand Paul here there is no room left to us to have this sense of relief and self-righteous self-satisfaction. His words here are meant to still challenge us and cause us to think and consider carefully what is being said. William Webb indicates that there are at least 12

different major views put forward by scholars as to what Paul is intending to communicate to his audience here.<sup>13</sup>

The question for us this morning is what does Paul mean for us to understand by this passage based on the metaphors drawn from Deuteronomy 22:10<sup>14</sup> and Leviticus 19:19 as well as other parts of Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Often this passage has been related to the issue of marriage and being “unequally yoked” (married) to an unbeliever. This is despite the fact that there is not any hint that Paul is referring to marriage at all in the context of 2 Corinthians. Perhaps it is the case that in our pursuit of specificity in discovering Paul’s meaning here we want to find a way to vindicate and perhaps even congratulate ourselves. Several interesting facts come to bear here on our discussion: One of these, that I think deserves some element of exploration here, is that what Paul wrote here in 2 Corinthians bears a remarkable resemblance to some texts found at Qumran (the Dead Sea

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<sup>13</sup> William J. Webb, “Unequally Yoked Together with Unbelievers,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 149:593 (1992), pp. 27-44. William J. Webb, “Unequally Yoked Together with Unbelievers,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 149:594 (1992), pp. 162-179. These are parts I and II of an article that were published some months apart.

<sup>14</sup> **You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together.** NRSV.

<sup>15</sup> **You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.** NRSV.

Scrolls). Fitzmyer puts it like this, “That there are contacts between the literature of the Qumrân Essene sect and the Pauline corpus is no longer a question of doubt. One may discuss, of course, whether the contacts are direct or indirect, but the general fact is admitted today.”<sup>16</sup>

The elements in the text of 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 that would suggest contacts of some sort with the community at Qumran are the following: (a) the triple dualism expressed in the couplets “uprightness and iniquity, light and darkness, Christ and Beliar (together with the underlying notion of the “lot”);” (b) the opposition that Paul expresses to idols; (c) the conceptual ideology of the temple of God; (d) the emphasis on the separation from impurity; (e) the particular manner in which Old Testament texts are connected and conveyed. Each of these elements are known to be particularly emphasized by the community at Qumran. With regard to the issue of dualistic expressions we know that this type of expression was heavily used by the Qumran community in order to divide humanity into two classes and we also find a very similar expression being used here by Paul as well

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Qumrân and the Interpolated Paragraph in 2 Cor 6:14-7:1,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 23:3 (1961), pp. 271-280.

as in other places in his letters (1 Thessalonians 5:5; Ephesians 5:8).<sup>17</sup>

Texts concerned with contrasting Belial and God, and those like this were frequent at Qumran (cf. 1QM 13,1-4; the end of the *War Scroll*). The portrayal of Belial as a demon, or personified force set over against the God of Israel occurs in 1QS 1,18.24; 2,19.5; 1QM 1,1.5.13; 4:2; 11:8; 14,9; 15,3; 18,1.3; 1QH 6,21; etc. The Hebrew word *Belial* occurs in the Old Testament with the common meaning of, “worthlessness, evil, perversion,” but the usage of this term as a proper noun, the name of a demon, is otherwise unknown in the Old Testament. It is then significant that we have the term Beliar used in the New Testament in a manner that is consistent with the way it is used at Qumran rather than with the way that it is used in the Old Testament. Considering this, along with the way Paul uses the triple contrast of light and darkness, uprightness and iniquity, and Christ and Beliar, it seems difficult to deny some type of connection with the Qumran writings.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Qumrân and the Interpolated Paragraph in 2 Cor 6:14-7:1,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 23:3 (1961), pp. 271-280.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Qumrân and the Interpolated Paragraph in 2 Cor 6:14-7:1,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 23:3 (1961), pp. 271-280.

In addition there is a distinctive opposition to idols at Qumran that would seem to align in some manner with the way Paul is concerned with idols in 2 Corinthians (1QS 2,16-17). There appears to be a common conceptual background. In the Qumran community there was not a concept of the community being viewed as the temple, but there was the concept of the community being seen as the “holy of holies” that was particularly cherished by the congregants there (1 QS 9,5-7). Purity and defilement were also a preoccupation with the Qumran community (CD 6,17). They were not to allow their property to be mixed with the property of “men of deceit who have not purified their conduct by separating from iniquity and by walking with perfect conduct” (1QS 9, 8-9). Finally, the conflated and piecemeal quote of Scripture that Paul uses here is very much akin what the Essene community would do (Leviticus 26:12, Ezekiel 37:27; Isaiah 52:11; Exodus 20:34 and 2 Samuel 7:14; cf. 2 Corinthians 6:16b-18). Fitzmyer believes that Paul actually made use here of a quote created, or at least found at the Qumran community.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Qumrân and the Interpolated Paragraph in 2 Cor 6:14-7:1,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 23:3 (1961), pp. 271-280.



If one picks up commentaries and articles you can find a vast range of statements regarding this section of Scripture with some ranging from even stating that this passage is not only not from Paul but that it is absolutely contrary to what Paul says elsewhere. To me this is absolute nonsense and demonstrates a misunderstanding of Paul and of the sanctity of Scripture as a whole. Paul is noted for being difficult to understand and for his frequent paraenetic departures that go off on a tangent clarifying the ethical foundation that will, if properly comprehended, bolster his argument. The text here demonstrates that Paul is thinking of close relationships in which, unless both parties are true believers, there cannot be the expectation that the relationship will flourish and prosper without Christian consistency being compromised.<sup>20</sup>

It would be wrong here to make the mistake that Paul is here condemning all contact and association with non-Christians: such isolationism would necessitate departure from the world as Paul had already written to the Corinthians about earlier (1

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<sup>20</sup> Donald G. McDougall, "Unequally Yoked - A Re-Examination of 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:4," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 10:1 (1999), pp. 113-137.

Corinthians 5:9-10<sup>21</sup>). It should also be noted that the proper interpretation of the phrase here, giving it the full contextual meaning that Paul uses here in Greek is, “do not go on becoming partners with those who are unbelievers, *as you are already doing*” (Μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγοῦντες ἀπίστοις). It is important to note that even as we focus on the issue of not being yoked with “unbelievers” the implication also exists that they should be “equally and harmoniously in partnership with fellow-believers.” True Christian partnership is that which exists between “genuine partners” and that can only properly be applied to those who are already one in Christ.<sup>22</sup>

According to McDougall, the key to interpreting this passage is to look to the context and here that particularly relates to the metaphors that Paul uses after the prohibition. He sets the contrasts up as rhetorical questions. The context and background here is certainly difficult and any and all proposals must be suggested with a certain amount of humility and hesitation.

Having said that, the most probable referent options for

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<sup>21</sup> **I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons—<sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world.** NRSV.

<sup>22</sup> Donald G. McDougall, “Unequally Yoked - A Re-Examination of 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:4,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 10:1 (1999), pp. 113-137.

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understanding Paul here are that some within the congregation are visiting temple prostitutes and joining in with pagans at temple feasts.<sup>23</sup> These activities will have been in the background of many in Corinth before accepting Christ and these things would have been an ordinary part of life for many. Changing this routine will have been both difficult and would perhaps have continued to be a residual issue from their former pagan life even all of these years later.

If then this is the issue, Paul is telling the Corinthians that it is improper for them to be involved with “unbelievers” in the cultic life of the city. He is calling for them to come out from the midst of these people and their activities that are incompatible with their new status as believers in Jesus Christ. It is possible that Paul here has in mind a number of explicit cases not mentioned here in the letter to the Corinthians. This is despite the fact that there do seem to be allusions to such matters relating to pagan feasts and idol worship it is indeed impossible to identify a single definitive referent. Paul, however, does not spell out the specifics here. Indeed Paul here leaves his brushstrokes here

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<sup>23</sup> Donald G. McDougall, “Unequally Yoked - A Re-Examination of 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:4,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 10:1 (1999), pp. 113-137.

broad and allows the “principle of separation” to remain as broad as possible in order to become a basic principle that would cover a variety of situations that are problematic rather than just a few specifics.<sup>24</sup>

Paul wants his audience to understand that pollution in their lives impedes their pursuit of God and His mission, and he challenges them once again to focus on a different worldview than they had previously accepted as pagans. “The sinful influence of the world with which the Corinthians had yoked themselves had affected their actions and attitudes and thereby had a negative impact on their exercise of godly behavior in God’s church. In like manner, the sinful influence that results from being yoked to the world in this or any age can so affect a believer’s or a church’s actions and attitudes that it keeps them from living in the manner God desires within the church.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Donald G. McDougall, “Unequally Yoked - A Re-Examination of 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:4,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 10:1 (1999), pp. 113-137.

<sup>25</sup> Donald G. McDougall, “Unequally Yoked - A Re-Examination of 2 Corinthians 6:11-7:4,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 10:1 (1999), pp. 113-137.

# Synopsis

As Paul begins this section he calls upon the Corinthians not to accept “the grace of God in vain.” He seems to see this as a genuine possibility, and gives this warning in order to persuade the Corinthians to avoid this very real possibility. Paul also indicates that the “Day of Salvation” has become a present reality for the Corinthians. He then defends he, and his companions, saying that they put no obstacles in the way of others in order that no fault may be found in their ministry. He cites as their special commendations the great list of hardships that he and his companions have faced as they proclaimed the Gospel message. He also cites the fact that he is poor as a commendation of his motivation in ministry. He is certainly not doing ministry to get rich.

At verse 11 Paul tells the Corinthians that he has spoken to them openly and frankly which is an expression of closeness and affection. He takes on the fatherly role that we have seen him express in other places, but here it seems to come with a special warmth and affection.

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At verse 14 Paul seems to break off on a tangent that is both difficult and complex. His call here is likely in response to activities that Paul is aware is still a part of the life of some there in the Corinthian community. They are participating in things that are wrong for them as followers of Christ to participate in; these are things that were a part of their former life. Paul calls upon the Corinthians to walk in a way that reflects their new status before God. He calls upon them to separate themselves from living life the way the rest of the world does and challenges to fulfill their calling as the holy children of God.

# Questions

1. How does a person accept the grace of God?
2. What do you think Paul means when he expresses that “now is the day of salvation?”
3. What are some ways that we can put obstacles in the way of people accepting salvation?
4. How, as servants of God are we called to commend ourselves to Him?
5. How did Paul and his companions commend themselves to God?
6. Is Paul offended when people mistreat him as he proclaims the Gospel? Why or why not?
7. Does Paul promise the followers of Christ that God will bless them with material riches if they follow him faithfully? Why?
8. What do you think it means today when people speak to each other frankly? Why?
9. How do you express your affection to others?
10. Why is it important to express affection?
11. What do you think it means to be “mismatched with unbelievers?”

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12. What does it mean for the church to be the “temple of God?”
  13. What does it mean to be pure before God in today’s world? How should it be expressed? Why?
  14. What do you think it means to be the sons and daughters of God?
  15. How would you sum up this chapter?