Second Corinthians
A Lesson Series by Arden C. Autry

Introduction and Lesson 1
2 Corinthians 1:1-2:11

Introduction
The church in Corinth provided Paul with many challenges, prompting the Apostle to write two lengthy letters which eventually became part of the New Testament. Paul’s inspired responses to their problems have blessed the whole church. So, in a sense, we might be thankful that Paul had so much trouble with the Corinthians! (As you can see below in the chronology of Paul’s dealings with them, the two letters are only part of the interaction.)

Second Corinthians continues the discussion of some items dealt with in First Corinthians (such as the divided loyalties of the members and the offering for the church in Jerusalem), but the letter as a whole reflects sharply contrasting feelings on the part of Paul. On the one hand, he is pleased with the progress already made with regard to some disciplinary issues dealt with in 1 Corinthians (and in the period after that letter; see 2 Cor. 5:6-8; 7:4-16). On the other hand, Paul is combative (even sarcastic) in dealing with some who are still resisting his authority (chs. 10-13 especially).

The humanity of Paul, including his emotions, is found in 2 Corinthians more vividly than in any of his other epistles—both his delight in the church’s progress and his disgust at the so-called “super apostles,” who may in fact be false apostles (cf. 11:5, 13). The vulnerability of Paul’s humanity illustrates a central theme of the entire book: powerful ministry through weak vessels. We need to realize that Paul and the other apostles were real human beings, with personal strengths and weaknesses similar to our own, so that we will fully appreciate the source of true, transforming power, which is God himself. The key verse for the entire book could well be 2 Cor. 4:7—“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

Paul’s Dealings with the Church at Corinth
You will find it helpful in reading 2 Corinthians to see it as part of Paul’s interactions with the believers in Corinth over a span of about six years, beginning with the founding of the church. The following sequence can be reconstructed from direct and indirect information found in Scripture (Acts, 1 and 2 Cor.):

1. Paul established the church in Corinth during his first visit, which lasted about 18 months (about 50-52 A.D.; see Acts 18).
2. Paul wrote one letter earlier than 1 Corinthians (to which he refers in 1 Cor. 5:9).
3. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians while ministering in Ephesus, 55 or 56 A.D.
4. Paul made a “painful visit” to Corinth sometime between the writing of 1 Cor. and 2 Cor., a visit painful for both Paul and many in the church (see 2 Cor. 2:1; 13:2). This visit was perhaps cut short because of opposition within the church, and Paul returned to Ephesus.
5. After the painful visit, Paul wrote another letter, “with many tears,” which Titus personally delivered. Titus reported back to Paul concerning the good effects of this disciplinary letter, which had caused many to be “sorry.” (See 2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8.) This “tearful letter” is
not 1 Corinthians but a letter we do not have. (The suggestion made by some modern scholars that 2 Corinthians 10-13 may have been part of that epistle is totally lacking in manuscript support.)

6. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, from Macedonia, while on his way to Corinth again, in 55 or 56 A.D.

7. On this last known trip to Corinth (Acts 20) Paul wrote Romans (57 A.D.), just before going back to Jerusalem, where Paul would be arrested and (eventually) taken to Rome as a prisoner.

This sequence of events and communications provides the overall historical framework for 1 and 2 Corinthians, but the “painful visit” and the “tearful letter” (both coming between 1 and 2 Cor.) provide the immediate background for much of what Paul has to say in 2 Corinthians.

**Paul’s Purpose in Writing 2 Corinthians**

In Macedonia, on his way to Corinth for the third time, Paul met his emissary, Titus, who reported that the majority had responded well to Paul’s words (in the “tearful letter”) and to Titus himself. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians with evident relief over the improved situation but also with determination to deal with those who were still not reconciled to Paul or to recognizing his authority.

Apparently some very persuasive “spiritual leaders” (either from within the church or having arrived after Paul’s departure) questioned Paul’s apostolic credentials and perhaps even his sincerity. The whole of 2 Corinthians is, in some ways, an extended defense of the genuineness and the nature of Paul’s ministry (and the nature of genuine spiritual leadership in general).

Paul never names his detractors in the epistle; so it is unclear whether all the complaints against Paul were coming from the same people. What is clear enough, however, is that certain persons (perhaps intruders in Corinth) were making false claims to apostolic authority. In the process of promoting themselves, they naturally sought to undermine Paul’s authority. They also were distorting the gospel because of their selfish motives and inflated opinions of themselves. Possibly the false teachers were promoting errors similar to ones Paul fought against in other epistles (such as “gnosticism” in Colossians, or Jewish legalism in Galatians). Paul does not identify the theological error as such, but he definitely and dramatically condemns the false teachers’ selfish motives and the destructive effects they have on those who fall under their sway.

In addition to dealing with ongoing disciplinary problems in the congregation, Paul also continues to encourage the church’s participation in the collection he is receiving for the relief of the Jerusalem church (chs. 8-9). This significant project (mentioned in 1 Cor. 16:1-3 and Rom. 15:25-27) was perhaps one of the things Paul’s critics had attacked. (Anything having to do with money always makes a good target, whether in politics or religion!)
Main Themes of Second Corinthians

1. Nature of Christian Ministry and Service  (chapters 1-7)
   - The new covenant: Spirit vs. the “letter”
   - Suffering as part of service

2. Generosity in Giving    (chapters 8-9)
   - The collection for the Jerusalem Church

3. Validity of Paul’s Apostolic Ministry  (chapters 10-13)
   - Answering Paul’s detractors and accusers

[For a more detailed outline, you might see the Introduction and Annotations for 2 Corinthians which I wrote for the Spirit-Filled Life Study Bible, Jack Hayford, general editor.]

Lesson Titles and Passages for this Series
Lesson One:  Plans and Pledges
   1:1-2:11

Lesson Two:  Being Led and Being Read, from Glory to Glory
   2:12-3:18

Lesson Three:  Dying and Rising—with Integrity
   4:1-5:10

Lesson Four:  The Ministry of Reconciliation
   5:11-6:2

Lesson Five:  Hardships, Holiness, and Good Grief
   6:3-7:16

Lesson Six:  Contagious Generosity
   8:1-9:15

Lesson Seven:  Spiritual Authority, True and False
   10:1-11:15

Lesson Eight:  Boasts of a True Apostle
   11:16-13:14

Note that Scripture quotations will be from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified.
Paul’s Greeting (1:1-2)
The opening of 2 Corinthians does not appear unusual when compared with other epistles by Paul, but the following points merit some notice. The mention of Paul’s commission as an apostle (vs. 1) turns out to be a key issue of the whole book, more so than in any of Paul’s other letters. Timothy is mentioned because he is with Paul at the time but also because he had been involved in helping Paul establish the church in Corinth (Acts 18:5). The greeting is extended to believers throughout Achaia, a region of Greece which included Corinth and the port city of Cenchrea as well (see Rom. 16:1).

Consolation in Affliction (1:3-11)
The first long paragraph of this epistle (vss. 3-7) is focused on receiving and sharing consolation in the midst of afflictions and sufferings. Why Paul would begin his letter this way starts to become clear in vs. 8 as Paul refers to some obviously harrowing experience he had just gone through. The availability of comfort and encouragement in the midst of trials is, however, part of the balanced tension marking this entire epistle, as Paul repeatedly contrasts the transcendent glories of the gospel and the Christian’s privilege in ministry with the weakness and vulnerabilities of the humans involved in these glories.

Notice in vss. 3-7 how often Paul uses the word “consolation” (or its equivalent in other translations, “encouragement,” “comfort”). The Greek word is *paraklesis*, which is related to the word “paraclete,” with which you may be more familiar since Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit as the coming of “another paraclete” (John 14:15-17; 16:7-11). There is another connection with Jesus’ promises when Paul refers to “affliction” (or “tribulation,” “trouble,” “pressure,” vss. 4, 6). Remember that Jesus promised his disciples that in this world we would have tribulation (John 16:33). (For some of Paul’s troubles, see 2 Cor. 11:23-29.)

One of the obvious things to see in this first paragraph is the way the consolation we receive from God is not for our benefit alone. God “consoles us in all our affliction, *so that* we may be able to console those who are in any affliction” (vs. 4). God wants us to *receive* his mercy and encouragement, but he also wants us to *share* it. For one thing, this is how God gets his love and mercy to touch the lives of people who need it; he sends people who have already experienced it. Another aspect of this, however, is that this is how God includes us in his work: he allows us the holy privilege of being co-workers with him in bringing his healing touch to the world (more on this especially in 2 Cor. 5).

Paul does not say exactly what was the nature of the “affliction” he had just gone through in “Asia” (the name of the Roman province in which Ephesus was located), but he describes it vividly (vs. 8). It could have been a life-threatening illness or, perhaps more likely, a brush with death at the hands of the opponents of Christianity. Whatever the cause of Paul’s danger, it had been sufficiently powerful to prompt Paul to “rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (vs. 9). This contrast between the vulnerable human and the Almighty Savior will be found throughout the book.
Changeable Plans and an Unchangeable Message (1:12-2:4)

One complaint against Paul concerned the way he had changed his previous plans to visit them. Charged by his detractors with fickleness, Paul explained that his change of plans was the result of his reluctance to repeat the earlier painful visit (1:15-2:4). Going far beyond this simple explanation, however, Paul begins to expound on the nature of Christian ministry—both his and that of every sincere servant of God (whether “ordained” or not).

Genuine ministers and servants of God, like Paul, share encouragement and comfort with others out of the encouragement and comfort they have received from the Lord (1:3-7). Genuine ministers and servants of God also reflect in their character the consistency of God’s promises (1:12ff.). Paul’s plans may have changed—in response to conditions in Corinth, or for whatever reason—but his heart’s intention and his commitment to the gospel had not wavered.

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (16:5), he was planning a visit first to Macedonia (i.e., Philippi, in the area north of Greece), then to Corinth (in Greece proper). Here, in 2 Cor. 1:16, he refers to a decision to visit Corinth before and after a trip to Macedonia, with hopes of blessing the Corinthians twice (vs. 15). Was that the visit that turned into the “painful visit”? Perhaps so, or perhaps the “painful visit” was more of an emergency trip to Corinth, with a quick return to Ephesus.

Whatever the exact sequence of events, one thing is clear: the continuing effect of the “painful visit” was the motive for another change in Paul’s plans. At the time of writing 2 Corinthians, Paul has left Ephesus and gone to Macedonia; from there he is on his way to Corinth for the third time. Obviously Paul feels the necessity of trying to explain the changes in his itinerary, no doubt because his detractors were pointing to this as evidence that Paul was unreliable and less spiritual than they were!

In response to his critics, Paul insists that his behavior and planning had not been “according to ordinary human standards” (1:17, literally, “according to the flesh”). On the surface, it may have appeared that Paul was “vacillating,” but the change in travel plans was actually due to an unswerving commitment to the unchanging message with which Paul had been entrusted. Paul moves the spotlight off himself and his changed itineraries and puts it on Jesus Christ, God’s unchanging and unchangeable “yes” (vs. 19). But Paul is also claiming that his behavior (including his change of travel plans) can only be evaluated by whether he has been faithful to and consistent with that message. If Paul’s behavior has undermined the trustworthiness of the message he has proclaimed, that is serious indeed. Paul insists, to the contrary, that his behavior has reflected the trustworthiness of the message: “As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been ‘Yes and No’” (vs. 18).

While hearing this as part of Paul’s defense of his own behavior, we might pause to consider its applicability to ourselves. What is the standard by which we evaluate ourselves and the course of our lives? Is it the opinion of others? Is it our changeable notions of what will make us “happy”? Is it our pride in our own version of “consistency”? What serves as the compass for our lives? For Paul, the compass was Jesus and the message Jesus had given him to preach, to teach, and to live out. For us, the compass and standard of evaluation needs to be God’s revealed will, just as it was for Paul.
It’s interesting to see how Paul moves from discussion of his travel plans to profound theological and spiritual observations. In the middle of what might be seen as the most mundane of concerns (a dispute about changing plans), Paul makes this astonishing statement: “no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ” (1:20, NIV). Jesus Christ is the focus, the standard, and the fulfillment of all God’s communication to us. Even if some have found Paul’s changes not to their liking, that is not the issue. What keeps us together as Christians, individually and corporately, is the utter reliability and fulfillment found in Jesus. Jesus is the focus, not Paul and not anyone else.

Thus also the focus of our response to God must be Jesus: “it is through him that we say the ‘Amen,’” which means “Yes, so be it!” (vs. 20). Hearing God’s Yes in Jesus, we say our Yes back to God in our relationship with Jesus. In the context of Paul’s contentious relationships with some in Corinth, we might paraphrase the significance of this statement as follows: “Whether you like me [Paul] or not, the important thing is your relationship with Jesus.”

That may not seem like a very important thing to say, until you remember what Paul was dealing with in the Corinthian church, in both 1 and 2 Corinthians--party loyalties to different spiritual leaders (see 1 Cor. 1:11-17; 3:3-7). Especially in 2 Corinthians, Paul feels compelled to defend the legitimacy of his apostleship and his authority in the Corinthian church. The necessity is thrust upon him by the continuing opposition to him by some within the church--to the detriment of the church. In the last four chapters of this epistle, when Paul’s words become harshest, he will repeatedly insist that the real issue in the church is not their opinion of Paul but their own spiritual health (see 12:19; 13:5). In contrast to Paul’s focus on Christ as God’s Yes to us and our Yes to God, compare also how false spiritual leaders usually make themselves the issue: Personal, unquestioning loyalty to the cult leader is often the most obvious evidence of the cultic nature of a religious movement and one of the surest signs of spiritual abuse.

In shifting the Corinthians’ attention away from himself and back to Jesus, Paul is also encouraging their confidence in all of God’s promises. They will be stronger in faith, hope, and love with Jesus as their focus than they could possibly be by focusing on Paul or any other human leader, genuine or not. After all, it is “in Christ” that God himself “establishes” Christian believers, whether they are apostles or laity (vs. 21--note “us with you”). All believers equally are “anointed” (Greek: *chrisas*) in Christ, the Anointed One (*Christos*).

Assurance of God’s promises can be as strong and sure as the confidence that God has raised Jesus from the dead (remember 1 Cor. 15). And in the believer’s personal experience with God in the present, there is a confidence-building awareness that what God has done already in Jesus he will certainly do in us. This is what Paul is referring to when he speaks of the Holy Spirit in vss. 21-22.

God’s “seal” marks us as belonging to him, but in this context it also implies preservation for the ultimate fulfillment of God’s purposes. That implication is made explicit by calling the Holy Spirit “a first installment” (vs. 22; cf. NIV: “a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come,” thus translating the one Greek word, *arrabon*). In this passage Paul does not say exactly “what is to come,” but in other passages where he calls the Holy Spirit God’s *arrabon* (first installment, guarantee, deposit, earnest) he makes it clear. In 2 Cor. 5:5 and Eph. 1:13-14, the Holy Spirit is
called God’s *arrabon*, his pledge to complete his redemptive plan by granting us a glorified body. Thus the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives now serves as God’s personal guarantee that he will complete the renewal that has already begun in us by the Spirit’s regeneration of our inner being (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16; see also Rom. 8:23). Present experience of God’s life-giving power confirms the Yes for eternal life that is in Jesus.

From consideration of this glorious destiny and our confidence in its fulfillment, Paul goes right back to the disputed issue of his changed travel plans (vs. 23ff.). This is not a case of poor writing on Paul’s part—jumping from one subject to another and back again. Rather, it is putting things in perspective. What is a mere change (or two) in an apostle’s travel plans compared with the unchanging *pledge* of God’s purposes? When we stop to think about it, we Christians have so much to rejoice about that we really can be free from griping about the personal idiosyncrasies or imperfections of other believers! That’s not to say that personal integrity is unimportant. Far from it! (See 2 Cor. 4:2.) But a lot of things we find fault with are really not that important at all. And often the thing we have found fault with looks entirely different when viewed in the perspective of the intention behind it. (For example, employing different styles of music in worship is not intended to irritate anyone, although it may. If the intention is recognized as trying to help everyone enter into worship, there will be greater flexibility on everyone’s part.)

**Pain and Forgiveness (1:23-2:11)**

Paul does not want a repeat of the “painful visit.” That is why he had made his most recent change in plans: “to spare you” (1:23). In fact, the delay in Paul’s arrival and the good work done by Titus as Paul’s emissary seem to have achieved the desired result—the church has finally acted with responsibility in the case of someone who had “caused pain” (2:5). Now Paul can look forward to visiting the Corinthian believers, who really are his children in a spiritual sense, who should be giving him reasons to rejoice (2:3) rather than causing so much heartache.

Some scholars identify 1 Corinthians as the letter Paul refers to in 2:4, but its tone does not seem to fit the description Paul gives here. Even though he deals with serious disciplinary issues in 1 Corinthians, Paul never seems to be expecting there the kind of grief about which he writes here—the kind of grief that *rebellion* causes, as compared with *disorderliness*. Other scholars have suggested that 2 Corinthians 10-13 fits the description of 2:4, but no manuscript evidence supports the separation of those chapters from the rest of the epistle. A far better understanding of events is to read 2:4 as a description of a letter which was not preserved, written between 1 and 2 Corinthians, dealing specifically with the disciplinary issue which had occasioned a painful rebellion on the part of many in the church.

Apparently the conflict which had prompted the “painful visit” and the “tearful letter” involved a challenge to Paul’s authority as an apostle. The “tearful letter,” delivered by Titus, had achieved a degree of correction. The rebel who had “caused pain” (vs. 5), not merely for Paul but “to some extent . . . to all of you,” had been repudiated by “the majority” of the church (vs. 6). This seems to be the result Paul had not been able to achieve while there during his “painful visit.” Indeed, it was the church’s unwillingness to deal with the rebel’s sin which had caused Paul such pain. Now, with their cooperation, Paul is ready “to forgive and console” the offender (vs. 7). To continue to punish him (after he has repented) would damage not only him but the church and Paul’s own work, because it would allow Satan to take advantage of the discord in the church.
The traditional identification of the offending person with the incestuous man in 1 Cor. 5:1-5 is possible, but the offense here seems to have been directed particularly at Paul. Perhaps someone trying to supplant Paul’s leadership had fastened on the issue surrounding the incestuous man as a way of attacking Paul himself.
In Lesson 1, we noted how Paul's travel plans had been subject to change. How very human he was will become even more evident in this week's lesson, as Paul admits that his anxiety for the believers in Corinth had interfered with an opportunity to preach the gospel in a new place. We can actually take encouragement from such an admission by the Apostle, because it enables us to see something very important (as in last week's lesson): the human vulnerability of Paul (and all Christians) in comparison with the true basis of our faith. In Lesson 1, the true basis was the unchanging purpose of God—the purpose revealed and embodied in Jesus, the purpose for which the Holy Spirit is given as a pledge. In this week's passage, the firm foundation is again the everlasting purpose of God for our good, revealed and made accessible in the surpassing glory of the New Covenant. We will also see how we humans, with all our limitations, are granted the awe-inspiring privilege of being part of God's communication to the world he created: in Christ we are "living letters."

**Being Led (2:12-17)**

From Ephesus, Paul's headquarters for about three years, he traveled to Troas. Like Ephesus, this city was located on the coast of what is now known as Turkey, but it was further north and thus much closer to Corinth and the other churches Paul had established in Europe. Paul had been in Troas before. Indeed, this was the city in which he had the vision of a Macedonian man asking him to come over to Europe to help the people there (Acts. 16:8-9). Ironically, on this later visit to Troas, Paul is again feeling the tug away fromTroas, this time not to Macedonia but to Corinth, where the turmoil in the church has Paul's heart in turmoil, too. The tug on Paul's heart was in conflict with his intended purpose for being in Troas: "to proclaim the good news of Christ" (vs. 12). The tug on his heart was in conflict with the circumstances in Troas, where "a door was opened for me in the Lord" (vs. 12). Just like us, Paul could feel torn, pulled in two directions. He could not do both things that he wanted to do.

Rather than pursue the opportunity in Troas, where he had apparently hoped for a rendezvous with Titus, Paul proceeded on to Macedonia, which would be on the way to Corinth (see map).— Paul's evangelistic zeal—always to preach the gospel in new territories (Rom. 15:20)—was overshadowed by his pastoral concern for the existing church in Corinth. Thus their spiritual immaturity was hindering the outreach to others, but Paul does not scold them directly for this.

In Macedonia, Paul finally met up with Titus and heard his good news, but you don't find that here in 2 Cor. 2. For that information you have to go all the way over to 2 Cor. 7:5ff., where Paul resumes the discussion of Titus and his report. From 2 Cor. 2:14 through 7:4, we have what is sometimes called "the great digression," in which Paul expands at some length on the nature of Christian ministry. For this "digression" we should be most grateful, since some of the most important and edifying teaching in the epistle is included in this section (just as a preacher's or teacher's "parenthetical remarks" can often be the greatest blessing in a message).
The digression is lengthy because Paul is trying to put the specific issues and disputes in Corinth into the larger context of what it really means to be spiritual. This is not an easy task. In fact, this is very much part of what Paul will later call the destruction of "strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4).

Getting people to trust in Jesus for salvation is one thing--a miracle in fact. Getting people to change the way they have always thought because it is ingrained in their culture--that is another miracle, but one not usually achieved without a great deal of effort over time by those who teach. (Much, if not all, of 1 Cor. is likewise concerned with trying to re-educate the Corinthian believers, who were mostly from pagan backgrounds, about what is genuinely spiritual and what is phony, or even dangerous, "spirituality." Recall how they had to be encouraged (in 1 Cor. 15) to believe in their own, future, bodily resurrection--something their pagan Greek culture had not taught them to value (see Acts 17:32).)

Paul's journey from Troas to Macedonia seemed to have been motivated (at the time) by his anxiety. And certainly he must have left Troas with some questions about whether he was doing the right thing, passing up an open door to preach the gospel where no church existed. But, beginning in 2:14, we hear Paul putting even that anxious trip into a different perspective: "Christ always leads us in triumphal procession." The weak, anxious, very human apostle has seen yet again that God's program is always going forward, and he's taking us with him in that progress, even when we feel like we are "spinning our wheels" or maybe even losing ground because the difficulties are so great. Even when we travel with human uncertainty, faith tells us we can know we are being led by Christ in triumph.

Paul utilizes vivid imagery here which would be familiar to the Corinthians. The armies of the Roman Empire made quite a ritual of their "triumphal procession," what we would call a "victory parade," although it was much more than that. Of course it included the conquering army and its leader, but the procession included captives as well as the victors. So which was Paul in Christ's triumphal procession--a captive or part of the victorious army? In some respects, you would have to say both. Remember how Saul/Paul was "captured" on the road to Damascus? Yet, Paul's illustration here in 2 Cor. 2, connected as it is with praise to God (vs. 14), seems to picture Paul (and all of us) as those who celebrate the victory with Jesus. At any rate, Paul's emphasis in vss. 14-16 is not so much on who we are in the parade as it is on how others perceive us.

A Roman triumphal procession was always accompanied with the lavish use of burning spices. Depending on your relationship to the victorious general and his army, the smells which filled the air could mean the best of news or the worst of news. The odor would, of course, be physically the same for every observer, but the significance would be different. If you were part of the defeated foe, the odor of the burning spices was a message of doom. If you were part of the conquering army, the fragrance would be part of the celebration of success.

Rather than focusing his attention on how we are part of the conquering army (which he could have done), Paul instead pictures us as the aroma of the burning spices: "we are the aroma of Christ" (vs. 15). Everywhere we go, led in this "triumphal procession," we spread "the fragrance that comes from knowing" Christ (vs. 14). This fragrance is sensed both by "those who are being saved" and "those who are perishing" (vs. 15). To one group, we smell like death; to the other group, we smell like life. By the very nature of what we are as Christians, as well as by the faithful words we speak, we testify to the condemnation of those who do not accept the life we
have. If we are alive because of our relationship with Christ, what does that say about those who lack the relationship?

We do not have to try to make unbelievers uncomfortable; indeed we should seek to let them know how loved they are. But if people are resisting what God wants to give them, they will resist us (cf. John 3:16-19). On the other hand, if people want to receive what God wants to give, we will "smell like" life to them (provided that is what we are really full of, and not full of ourselves and religious pride). We will "smell like" what they are hungry for. They will see in us what they have been looking for; they will hear from us what their hearts have been longing to hear.

Just as those present for a Roman triumphal procession detected a fragrance full of significance, so do those who encounter the company of Jesus' disciples. The fragrance is significant in revealing the ways things are now (who has already won the victory?) and for what is about to come in the future (whose will is going to prevail, even over those who continue to "hold out" in their resistance?). Thus Paul says we are, to some, "a fragrance from death to death" (vs. 16) -- death now in their alienation from God, and death in the future as a result of ultimate judgment. To others, we are the fragrance "from life to life" -- life now in knowing Jesus and the promise of future life through the resurrection.

For Christians (as mere mortals) to have such significance for the eternal destinies of others is a truly serious matter, prompting Paul's question in vs. 16: "Who is sufficient for these things?" Who, in other words, is qualified, or who would dare to make his or her life of everlasting significance for others? How could anyone claim to be worthy of such a role? (Paul answers this question in 3:5.) The life-and-death seriousness of embodying and speaking such a message to the world around us makes it imperative that we act and speak "as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence" (vs. 17). With so much at stake, we dare not be "peddlers of God's word," even if "many" are (vs. 17). We dare not use the life-and-death message of God for our own agenda, to promote selfish interests, to "cash in," or just "to make a living." Paul seems to imply that some in Corinth have been doing precisely that.

**Being Read (3:1-6)**

In case we might be tempted to think the seriousness of which Paul wrote in 2:16-17 applies only to "professional ministers," we immediately are made aware in ch. 3 that every believer embodies (and should speak) God's communication to the world. Here Paul tells the Corinthian believers that they themselves are epistles of Christ, "living letters," so to speak.

Since Paul had just contrasted himself with those who are "peddlers of God's word," the Corinthians might well think he was writing to commend himself to them (3:1). Paul insists otherwise. It's actually a bit absurd to suggest that the very person who introduced the gospel to them, who introduced them to Jesus, should need to commend himself to them, or try to make the case for his legitimacy as a minister of the gospel. If a letter of recommendation is supposed to vouch for the qualifications and worth of the person for whom it is written, surely the Corinthian believers themselves--by their very existence as believers in Jesus--should fill that role for Paul.
If they are legitimately Christian, then he is legitimately a minister, regardless of what his detractors are saying. Other teachers and would-be apostles may have arrived after Paul, bearing all kinds of introductory letters and boasting all sorts of credentials and connections with important people, but what is that compared with bringing the Corinthian Christians into the Kingdom? "You yourselves are our letter [epistole]," says Paul (vs. 2). But he goes a step further. As Christians, they do more than testify to the legitimacy of Paul's ministry. Far more important is the fact that they are "a letter of Christ" (vs. 3), certainly as a "result" of Paul's "ministry" (NIV) but also by the working of a power far beyond Paul's human influence: "written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" (vs. 3).

When Paul had been ministering among them, a power greater than Paul had been at work, making a radical difference in their lives, fulfilling what had been promised in the Old Testament about the coming of a "new covenant." In Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-27, God had promised to do an inward work, to write his law on the hearts of his people and even to put his very Spirit within them (see also Rom. 8; Heb. 9:9, 14). That reality in the Corinthian believers' lives, even though they are immature in many ways, testifies to the reality of Christ, the reality of the Spirit, and the availability of the promised new covenant. The Corinthian Christians themselves are letters of testimony to the truth of the gospel.

None of this would be true if the Corinthian church was only following the best ideas of man (of Paul or someone else). All of this is true only because (and to the extent that) God's Holy Spirit has been at work in Paul's work and in the work and words of others who truly belong to God. That's Paul's confidence (vs. 4); that's his answer (vs. 5) to the question he asked in 2:16: "Who is sufficient for these things?"

No human, acting alone, is sufficient (competent, worthy, capable) for the life-and-death significance of the gospel, nor for the transforming effect on people's lives. Our competence, our adequacy to be ministers who speak and act on behalf of God's kingdom, is the competence of God alone. If God does not act, our words about him will be hollow and ineffective, just one more set of human ideas for people to do with as they will. And the power of such words and deeds to transform human lives will be only the power of humans to change themselves.

Human beings and human society can be changed greatly by the influence of attractive ideas and inspiring leaders, but they cannot be changed enough—not enough to deliver us from our most fundamental problems: our captivity to the selfishness of sin and the power of death at work in our mortal beings. Only if God works by his Spirit, bringing a new quality of life which delivers us from captivity to sin, bringing a new strength of life which is stronger than death—only if God works can human beings be changed enough to serve our true purpose and not be overcome by sin and death.

That's why "the letter [gramma] kills" (vs. 6). As Paul explains in some detail elsewhere, the revealed will of God in the Old Testament is not a bad thing but something that is "holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:14). The problem is not something inherent in the letter (in the sense of the written revelation); the problem is in the readers of the letter. If the readers of the letter of the law and the prophets (or the gospels and epistles) don't experience the work of "the Spirit [who] gives life" (2 Cor. 3:7), the effect of the letter will be deadly, all the more so if the improvement
in life achieved by following the good advice in "the letter" leads the reader to think that life has been improved enough to satisfy the real need. (Cf. John 5:39-40.)

Whether "the letter" being read is the gramma found in the Old Covenant, in the New Covenant, in theology or church history, or even the epistle of a "living-letter" Christian, the reader must do more than extract useful and beneficial ideas and insights by which to improve his or her life or society. The Spirit of God alone gives life. Human appropriation of available religious knowledge will bring insufficient deliverance; human submission to the transforming presence of God's Holy Spirit is what is required. Our sufficiency is not in what we know from the letter; our sufficiency is from God, who makes all of his people "ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6) in which "the Spirit gives life." Every believer can be a co-worker with God in ministering this life to others, but only as a co-worker with God, who alone can give life by his Spirit. Thus, our goal as "ministers of a new covenant" cannot be simply to get people to imitate us, for that would be mere human conformity to "the letter," and it would eventually kill. Our goal, rather, has to be to help them open themselves up to God's presence, to "the Spirit [who] gives life" (vs. 6).

It's the provision of access to the empowering presence of God which gives the new covenant its greater effectiveness in comparison with the old. This greater effectiveness is both inward and outward, for the difference in the new covenant is not the subtraction of the letter but the addition of the Spirit. The new covenant is more inward in the sense of an inner change (see Jer. 31:33; Rom. 8; Heb. 9:9, 14). Because it creates a visible community of believers empowered by the Spirit to live out God's will, the new covenant is more outwardly effective than the old.

From Glory to Glory (3:7-18)

Having moved from the observation that the Corinthian believers were Paul's letter of recommendation into the comparison between the old and new covenants, Paul now expands on this comparison in one of the truly great passages in this entire epistle.

Paul calls the old covenant "the ministry of death" (vs. 7) not because it was intended to cause death but because that was its result (cf. Rom. 7:13). The cause of death was not the covenant but the unchanged human heart. The old covenant, "chiseled in letters on stone tablets," did not change the heart, but the new covenant is written by the Spirit "on tablets of human hearts" (vs. 3). That is to say, the new covenant, when it is truly present is present in a way that changes a person's will and affections in ways that the old covenant could not. (Of course, it is perfectly possible for someone to claim that he is participating in the new covenant, and to conform outwardly to what seem to be the provisions and stipulations of the new covenant, and yet, in reality, be unchanged inwardly because of being closed to the effects and influence of God's Holy Spirit. Such a person effectively makes the new covenant an old covenant, by making it no more effective than the old covenant. Sadly we have to say that this is precisely what many Christians have done with the new covenant.)

Because the old covenant brought knowledge of God's will without bringing the inward change needed for us to do God's will from the heart, the old covenant is--in effect, not in its intention--a "ministry of condemnation" (vs. 9). Nevertheless, as Paul recalls the scene for us from Exodus 34:29-35, the old covenant's coming brought a genuine "glory" (vs. 7). The giving of the old
covenant was accompanied by great glory because it was *God's Word*, and Moses, as minister or servant bringing that covenant from God to the people, reflected its glory. The lingering effect on Moses' face was so great that "Israel could not gaze" at him, because they were frightened.

A couple of observations could be made at this point. The first is one that Paul himself makes: even the glory on Moses' face was a passing glory (vs. 7; RSV: "a glory now set aside"; NIV: "fading though it was"). Paul indicates that Moses put the veil over his face not only because the people were afraid to look at him directly but also because he wanted to prevent their seeing "the end of the glory" (vs. 13). The second observation is not one that Paul makes directly but which he rather implies by the contrast between the adherents to the old covenant and the participants in the new: those who saw the glory on Moses' face did not, so to speak, "catch the glory." It did not spread from his face to theirs. Because of the veil over Moses' face? Because of their fearful inability to gaze at Moses' face even before he put on the veil? No, but because you can't "catch the glory" without immediate contact with the source of glory, which is God himself.

Indeed, the glory on Moses' face was transitory and now completely eclipsed by the glory of the new covenant, which by "the ministry of the Spirit" (i.e., by the effect of the Spirit on those who enter into the new covenant) is a "ministry of justification," which abounds in "much more" glory than the old covenant (vs. 8-9). So why aren't our faces shining with a frightening light? Part of the answer has to be that the glory of the new covenant is not only *quantitatively greater* and *longer lasting* but also, in a very important sense, *qualitatively different* in its effect.

The glory which came with the old covenant affected Moses' face (for a time, and then it faded); the glory of the new covenant affects the totality of our being, to transform us "into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (vs. 18). Rather than being *periodically but temporarily affected* by a fresh exposure to the Lord's glory (as Moses was, vs. 13; Exod. 34:34-35), we are being *progressively transformed* into the image of the glorious Lord whose face we, the unveiled, see as we remain open to the Spirit (vs. 17).

The important contrast is between periodic, *temporary effects on the surface* and permanent, *progressive transformation of the character and will*. It must be said that a lot of "religious experiences" seem to be the former rather than the latter. But transformation of the character and will into the image and likeness of Christ is the goal and the glory of the new covenant. Compared with this, other "glories" are superficial—whether on Moses' face or in the exhilaration of an audience which has thoroughly and sincerely enjoyed a choir's anthem or a preacher's sermon. No superficial, passing effect can really be called glorious in comparison with the glory of becoming like Jesus in our character and, ultimately, in our entire being (cf. Rom. 8:28-29; 1 John 3:2; Phil. 3:21)

Because of the transforming glory, ministers of the new covenant (i.e., every believer) should have "hope" and "act with great boldness" (vs. 12). We have hope because we are not looking forward to the fading of the glory but to the greater and greater manifestation and effect of our unveiled exposure to "the Lord," which is to say our openness to be moved and shaped by "the Spirit" (vs. 17). And we must have an appropriate kind of boldness, because we must be "unveiled" people in the presence of God. Just as Moses used to remove the veil whenever he
went into the presence of the Lord (vs. 16, using words from Exod. 34:34), so we, when we turn
to the Lord experience an unveiling of our being—to the extent that we really bring ourselves
honestly, humbly, and responsively to God. Turning to the Lord in this sense is one and the
same as turning to the Spirit of God, which is why Paul says, in vs. 17, "Now the Lord is the
Spirit."

For us to turn to the Lord as Moses did is to turn to the Holy Spirit, who makes real to us the
presence of Jesus and the Father. And as we turn to the Lord with unveiled face and know that
he sees us as we really are, his Spirit gives us the "freedom" to become what he created us to
be—in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). The freedom of the Spirit
here is not freedom to do as we please but freedom to be what pleases God. This exercise of
freedom is our only true fulfillment, since any other use of freedom leads to slavery, self-
destruction, and harm to others (see Gal. 5:1, 13-26; 6:7-8 for more on the right use of freedom).

It's true, of course, that we can use the freedom we already have to resist the freedom that God
wants to give us. We can choose to resist being changed and to read the words of the Old and
New Testaments with "the same veil" over our hearts and minds that blinds those who profess no
belief in the new covenant (vs. 14). We can recite the Lord's Prayer or prayers of our own
wording without really being open to the presence of God, choosing to maintain control (we
imagine) of our own destinies by offering God only an outward show of allegiance, or perhaps
exercising our religion to impress others or to keep our conscience relatively quiet. In other
words, we can indulge in superficial exercises rather than risk "unveiled" confrontation with the
Lord of glory. This, however, can only lead to further hardening of our minds and hearts (vs. 14)
unless and until, by the grace of God, we surrender our freedom to evade Christ to have it
replaced by the freedom to be re-made in the image of Christ.

As long as we read the Bible or say our prayers with "veiled faces," avoiding the personal
exposure of a confrontation with Jesus, we can get no more out of it than the adherents to the old
covenant. We will get good ideas and guidance in many ways, but we will not have our inner
being changed in the way we need. That comes "only in Christ" (vs. 14), who is the true glory of
God's Word (see 4:6). God's Word will be for us a veiled glory until we become unveiled
persons in God's presence. It's not that there's a veil over the Word; the Word is unveiled as
"revelation," which means "unveiled." The veil is over the hearts and minds of those who read it
without personal submission to God's transforming will and presence, revealed/unveiled in
definitive form in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord.

In writing this passage, Paul was thinking first of his Jewish brethren who did not share his belief
in Jesus as the Messiah. He knew from personal experience (Acts 9) that the change needed was
the unveiling of the person's heart and mind, not the unveiling of the words in the Scripture.
Paul also knew from personal experience that the transformation was not completed in one
moment, even when the initial conversion was as dramatic as his had been. Notice that Paul
emphasizes the ongoing process of change in 2 Cor. 3:18: "And all of us, with unveiled faces,
seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." Those who
have already experienced some degree of transformation (and certainly Paul had!) are still being
transformed, progressively, by the continuing work of the Spirit of the Lord.
Some translations use words such as "beholding as in a mirror" instead of "reflecting." The Greek word \[katoptrizomai\] can actually be translated either way, and in this case I think we do not need to choose between the alternatives, since both ideas are present in this context. We see the glory of the Lord, and we are changed by what we see, so that we increasingly reflect the glory we see. This is like what John says in 1 John 3:2: "when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." That is true in the ultimate fulfillment of seeing Jesus, literally with our eyes, at the second coming or when, through death, we go to be with him in his fuller presence. But it is also true in our lives now. As we "see" Jesus more clearly, we are changed more deeply and more pervasively. We reflect the glory at which we gaze.

In next week's lesson, Paul will develop another aspect of being "unveiled"—our honest and open dealings with one another.

Questions from LessonMaker by NavPress

**2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6 - Ministers of the New Covenant**

**OPEN IT**
1. What does the phrase "the letter of the law" mean to you?

**EXPLORE IT**
2. Why was Paul willing to leave Troas, despite the opportunities there? (2:12-13)
3. By what method did Paul expect the gospel to be spread? (2:14)
4. In what way are Christians the aroma of Christ? (2:15)
5. In what way are Christians the smell of death to some and the fragrance of life to others? (2:16)
6. How did some people of Paul's day misuse the Word of God? (2:17)
7. In what sense were the Corinthians a record of Paul's values and concerns? (3:2-3)
8. Where did Paul get his competence? (3:5-6)
9. What's the difference between the letter and the Spirit? (3:6)

**GET IT**
10. What causes Christians to be legalistic about their faith?
11. What can we learn from Paul's pastoral concern for the Corinthians?
12. In what ways are you an aroma of Christ among others?
13. In what ways has God made you competent?

APPLY IT
14. What about Christ do you want people to "read" in you this week?

**2 Corinthians 3:7-18 - The Glory of the New Covenant**

OPEN IT
1. In what circumstances do people in our society wear veils or coverings?

EXPLORE IT
2. Why could the Israelites not look at Moses' face? (3:7)

3. What is the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant? (3:11)

4. Why did Moses cover his face with a veil? (3:13)

5. What must people do to have the veil that covers their hearts taken away? (3:16)

6. How is it possible for us to reflect the Lord's glory? (3:18)

7. How does the glory of the new covenant differ from that of the old covenant? (3:18)

GET IT
8. How have you experienced the Spirit's freedom in your personal life?

9. In what ways do you see the Lord's glory reflected in your life?

10. In what ways do you struggle to allow the Holy Spirit to control your life?

APPLY IT
11. How can you turn to the Lord each day?

Comparisons between the "letter" and the Spirit

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In last week’s lesson we saw Paul move from a defense of his changed travel plans into a profound statement comparing the old and new covenants, in which he described our privilege in Christ of being the “unveiled” ministers of the transforming glory at which we gaze. In this week’s lesson Paul continues to focus our attention on the blessings but also the responsibilities we have in our relationship with Jesus and as his people in this world. Our role in this present age, however, cannot be rightly understood unless put into the context of our eternal destiny. This section of 2 Corinthians, perhaps more than any other passage in Paul’s writings (with the possible exception of Rom. 8), compares the present and the future, our weakness and God’s power, and the humility and glory of being Jesus’ people in this world.

Integrity of the Unveiled (4:1-6)
As people of the new covenant of the Spirit (3:6), we can speak and act with boldness (3:12), confident of the transforming effects of the glory of God’s presence (3:18). Along with the glory and the boldness, however, Paul insists on honesty and integrity in our dealings with one another and with the world in general.

First we should note the connecting word with which this chapter begins: “Therefore” connects what is about to be said with what has just been said, pointing to it as the logical basis on which to make the new statement. (Remember also that the chapter divisions were not put in until many centuries later. In this case, chapter four is very much a continuation of the topics of chapter three.) Because of the transforming glory, because of the unveiled freedom we have in the new covenant, and because of the mercy of God which makes our participation and our ministry in the new covenant possible, “we do not lose heart.” Paul had abundant reason not to be discouraged, despite the often difficult circumstances of his life (more about this in chapter 11). When we are discouraged with our attempts to live the Christian life or share the Christian message, we need to remember what Paul has just rehearsed for us in chapter three.

The glorious privileges of the new covenant, based on the mercies of God, are also the reason “we have renounced the shameful things that one hides” (vs. 2). We have renounced hidden agendas and attempts to manipulate others for selfish benefit. If we are “unveiled” in the presence of God, we also don’t need a veil over our motives when dealing with other people, especially when speaking in the name of the Lord. Not only is it not needed, such a veil would be inappropriate. So, “we refuse to practice cunning” (NRSV; “deception,” NIV) and choose instead “the open statement of the truth.” That is Paul’s defense (his “letter of recommendation,” if he needs one; recall 3:1-3); that is also our best defense--to be people of integrity. Not by putting on a show to impress others, but by living and speaking with integrity, we may hope “to commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone” (vs. 2).

Being a person of integrity does not necessarily mean that you won’t have enemies or that everyone will appreciate you; that much we can learn from Paul and from common human experience. But being a person of integrity, besides being the best possible safeguard against possible slander, is simply the right thing to be and do. The example of Jesus would show us
that a life of integrity is not always applauded or rewarded by the world; Paul’s example shows us that integrity of motive and action is not always appreciated even by the church! But Paul could not let his popularity with believers be his guiding principle any more than Jesus could with unbelievers. The ultimate standard is not what people think of us—even “good people.” There’s nothing wrong with being liked and appreciated, but everything we do needs to be evaluated “in the sight of God” (vs. 2; cf. 5:10—we must eventually answer to God, not to popularity with humans).

If we act and speak with integrity, as the “unveiled,” some people will still not appreciate it, since they are not among the “unveiled.” They are still under the sway of “the god of this world,” who keeps them from “seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (vss. 3-4). The gospel is not veiled by Jesus; it is not veiled by his church. The enemy of the truth (Satan) is the one who wants to veil the gospel. At this point Paul does not elaborate on how Satan does this, nor does he observe that the “veiled” are nevertheless responsible for their blindness to the extent that people choose darkness rather than light (cf. John 3:19). The point here is that Christian integrity demands that we not veil the truth; ministers of the new covenant (all Christians) are the unveiled, not the veiled or the ‘veilers.’ If some people just don’t see it, let it not be because we have veiled it.

What we have to preach, teach, and share is the revealed (“unveiled”) truth from God. Christianity is not about some secret truth which only a few can know; it is about the public declaration and public living of the truth revealed in Jesus. As with anything public, the gospel is open to investigation, to question and discussion. That does not mean it is up for a vote--the Kingdom of God is not a democracy. But it does mean that all underhanded strategies and deceptive tactics are off limits for us who represent the unveiled new covenant.

In our unveiled proclamation and living of the truth, the message should be plain: Jesus Christ is Lord and we are all Jesus’ servants (vs. 5). The apostle actually calls himself a servant or slave of the Corinthian believers “for Jesus’ sake.” Paul often calls himself a slave or servant of Jesus Christ, especially in the opening words of his epistles. Hear verse five in the context of Paul’s difficulties with the Corinthian church (and the rival teachers seeking to displace Paul’s influence with their own) and you will hear him saying something to this effect: “Jesus’ servants are not your masters, lording it over you. If anything, we are your servants for Jesus’ sake.” (This is in perfect agreement with Jesus’ teaching, isn’t it? See Matt. 20:25-28.)

Why would Paul need to write this to the Corinthians? Because the motive of the false teachers who are trying to undermine Paul is precisely the opposite: they want power (in the form of influence). If they were simply looking for a way to serve, they would not be a threat to the church. Because they are looking for a way to be important, perhaps even to make themselves indispensable, they are dangerous. Paul will deal more harshly with this threat in later chapters (see 10:12; 11:4, 13)

Paul wants to keep our focus on Jesus and not on human leaders--who in our weakness and vanity like to be treated as though we were important and are thus endangered by intemperate compliments from sincerely grateful people. Only by keeping our focus on Jesus do we truly see “the light of the gospel” (vs. 4). Certainly the light can be seen “as though reflected in a mirror”
(3:18) in the lives of Christ’s servants, but no one (certainly not the minister) should think that being a mirror is the same as being the source of the light! It is in Christ that we see “the image of God” (4:4). We may see something of what God is like by looking at the people who “are being transformed into the same image” (3:18), but it will be incomplete and mixed until the transformation is complete.

On the one hand, we need to realize our responsibility to be good examples, to be good “epistles,” to use the imagery of 3:2-3. On the other hand, we need to be wary lest our pride and vanity be puffed up by people looking to us and admiring us as though we were the source of the genuine goodness of our lives. For our own safety we need to remember that we are the “mirrors” and not the source of the light reflected in our lives. Jesus is the Lord; we are his servants. Others will experience transformation only as they are exposed to the light of Jesus directly, by personal knowledge of him. Exposure to our reflection of that light is most effective when it leads others to the point where they open up to the direct light of Jesus’ presence (cf. Matt. 6:16).

If there is genuine light in our lives for others to see (and there is if we are truly believers in Jesus), it is because of God’s will and God’s word. That is the point of Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 4:6--the same God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness” is the one who has caused the light of Christ to shine “in our hearts.” Who gets credit for light being created in the beginning? Who gets credit for the light that shines in our lives and from our lives for others’ benefit? Physical light (Gen. 1:3) and spiritual light are both God’s gift, not our achievement. Proper boasting about the light must be boasting about God. (Cf. 1 Cor. 1:30-31. See Acts 9:3-20 for Paul’s encounter with the light of God.)

**Dying and Living with Jesus (4:7-15)**

Second Corinthians 4:7 is thematic for the entire epistle, because it so vividly depicts the paradox of how weak human beings can be the instruments of the great power of God. Unlike many who think that the sure sign of being spiritual is to be stronger than other people, Paul admits to his weaknesses (later he will even “boast” about them; 11:30). He does this in response to his critics and rivals in Corinth who have pointed out Paul’s shortcomings in the attempt to make themselves look stronger. One supposed shortcoming already referred to was the way Paul changed his travel plans; criticism of Paul on that point was one reason he had to defend himself as acting in the best interests of the Corinthians.

The recognition that Paul, like everyone else, is a “clay jar” (NRSV; “earthen vessel,” NKJV) is not an excuse for lack of integrity but simply an acknowledgment of human limitations. We can always find some deficiency in another human being when we hold them to super-human standards. What is required is faithful integrity, not invulnerability and perfect wisdom. And, as we have seen repeatedly and will continue to see in this epistle, the weakness of the human vessel should turn our attention to the transcendent power of God, which is where we need to place our faith anyway. Paul’s rivals might say, “You know you just can’t trust Paul; he’s always changing his mind,” but what they mean is, “You ought to trust us instead.” In effect Paul replies, “You can trust my integrity; but even if you think you can’t, or if you just don’t want to trust me, you still can trust Jesus and that’s the important thing.” When Christians really put their trust in Jesus, they can be more patient with one another’s limitations, and they are less
vulnerable to the persuasive presentations of other humans who make excessive claims for their importance or their spiritual advancement.

The imagery of 4:7 is clear enough to require no elaborate explanation, but it might be useful to remember that Paul was talking about the most common of everyday implements when he talked about “clay jars.” Nothing was more common in that society. Nothing could be more obvious to the people of Corinth than the usefulness and the vulnerability of clay jars. If Christians are “clay jars,” that means we too are common (nothing superhuman or inherently better than any other person), but we can also be useful, and we remain always vulnerable.

We need to remember that every Christian is like a clay pot in some ways. None is inherently better or more worthy than another. Our humanity we have in common with one another. Every believer is useful. You need to know that for yourself; you need to realize that in the way you regard other believers (cf. 1 Cor. 12:21). Every believer is vulnerable and needs to be treated with appropriate gentleness. To be sure, some are more easily wounded than others, but no one is invincible (see Gal. 6:1). Some of us need to remember our own vulnerability when it’s time to say “no” to a request for our time or energy. No one of us is able to be everything for everyone. Even useful vessels have their limits of capacity as well as strength.

The greatest thing about these clay pots is what they contain, and everywhere the container goes the contents go. Paul says that these human clay pots, these common and vulnerable human vessels, contain “treasure.” The treasure is “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (vs. 4); it is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (vs. 6). As with being the “aroma of Christ” (2:15), the privilege of every believer is to contain the same immeasurable treasure. So how much is each clay pot worth? Each is of immeasurable value, because of the immeasurable treasure; none can be considered of more value than another since the treasure in one is the same as that in another.

Over the next several verses Paul expands on the paradox he has pictured for us in vs. 7--the paradox of transcendent, glorious, divine treasure found in common, weak, limited human vessels. Reflecting on his own experiences but also describing every Christian’s experience over time, Paul says we are “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (vss. 8-9). We could say, “It’s often bad but never as bad as it could be,” but that would not really get at the depth of what Paul is describing. Paul is not simply being optimistic based on acknowledging that “things could be worse.” No, the paradox is more profound than that. Paul says we (as we follow and serve Jesus) are sharing in Jesus’ death and resurrection in our day-to-day struggles, challenges, and answers to prayer.

We are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus” (vs. 10)--more literally, “the dying of Jesus,” i.e., not just the state of being dead but the process of dying. It would be more comfortable, in fact, if we could get the mortification over with, but Paul indicates that it is a daily, ongoing process, as Jesus also said in Luke 9:23: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”
The process is “dying” but the purpose is not death. The purpose, rather, is “so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4:10). So the purpose is life, not death, but if it is to be truly Jesus’ life it comes through our dying (to selfishness, to pride and vanity, and often to our own plans). Even for a mature Christian believer such as Paul, the process continues. The process is humbling (or humiliating, to speak more frankly), but the purpose is glorious, bestowing on us the highest of honors—“that the life of Jesus made be made visible in our mortal flesh” (vs. 11).

Paul may sound a bit repetitive in vss. 10-11, but he is actually emphasizing the greatness of the paradox. That the victorious, divine life of Jesus, who has defeated death for all time, should become evident in “our mortal flesh” is the height of the paradox. Even before our bodies are transformed to become immortal, immortal life is present in them. This treasure is so great that the container is going to have to be renovated! (More about this below, in ch. 5.) But even now, the immortal life of Jesus is present and at work in us, there for the benefit of others as well as our own.

“So death is at work in us, but life in you” (vs. 12). By these words Paul succinctly points out the purpose of the process as it affects others. By his willingness to suffer hardship, to make sacrifices of personal comfort, and his willingness even to be thought of as weak and contemptible, Paul makes himself available to the life-giving purposes of God. Paul’s hardships have been for the benefit of the Corinthians who have come to know Jesus. Because Paul has been willing to be “weak” in the eyes of some, the Corinthians have been able to experience the power of God. Paul thus imitates Jesus’ own willingness to be weak for the sake of effective power being released for others’ deliverance (13:4).

Again, let it be emphasized, the purpose is life, not death, even though dying is unavoidably part of the process. Just as Jesus’ purpose on the cross was not simply to die and stay dead, so Paul’s motive in his hardships of every sort was not that he particularly liked suffering or that suffering as such is spiritual or inherently noble. In fact suffering is often degrading, and it is certainly not inherently good. But suffering for a good enough cause makes suffering worth it. And a Christian always has open the choice of asking God to deliver us from suffering (cf. the Lord’s Prayer) and, until such time as we are delivered, asking God to bring a greater good to outweigh the sorrow (see below, 4:17).

Knowing that life and not death is God’s purpose is what gives us confidence. Thus Paul, echoing the words of Psalm 116:10 to express the perspective of faith in the midst of troubles, declares, “I believed, and so I spoke” (2 Cor. 4:13). What does he speak of? His troubles? Yes, but that is not all. Paul speaks of deliverance from all troubles. In fact, Paul can speak so bluntly about his weaknesses and his mortality precisely because he has placed his trust in Jesus’ strength and Jesus’ resurrection (vs. 14; cf. 1:8-10). Paul can endure the dangers and the hardships because he is confident of the ultimate outcome, both for him and for those to whom he has brought the gospel at great cost to his own personal, temporal comfort: “the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence” (vs. 14). It’s worth it for Paul to pay the price in order to participate in the glorious expansion of the numbers who give thanks to God and acknowledge his glory (vs. 15).
An Eternal Perspective on Time (4:16–5:10)

Knowing God’s purpose gave Paul confidence to endure the process. He also drew great strength from knowing the difference between what is temporary and what is permanent. All Christians, indeed all people, need this perspective on time viewed in the context of eternity.

Despite the hardships and frustrations (such as the ones Paul often experienced because of the Corinthian church!), Paul says, “we do not lose heart” (vs. 16). The first reason Paul refuses to be discouraged is the resurrection, the hope to which he had just referred in vs. 14. He will elaborate on this hope in 4:16-5:10, in one of the more important NT passages about the new body that we all need to be expecting. A second but very important reason for not being discouraged is the ongoing, present experience of God’s renewing presence, which Paul has already been discussing (3:12-4:12). These two reasons cannot be separated, however, since one reinforces the other.

Notice again how realistic Paul can be about the present human limitations as he forthrightly admits that “our outer nature is wasting away” (vs. 16, literally “our outward man”). If that is all there is to say about us, it would be hard to say, “we do not lose heart”! But there is more to say: “our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”

When we are young it is harder to recognize the mortality of the outer nature. Even though we see its effects in others, it’s difficult to imagine ourselves aged and losing strength. As we grow older, it becomes easier to acknowledge but not necessarily easier to accept or to deal with in a positive way. Truly, some people do become “old and bitter,” resentful of the loss of youth and vigor and perhaps fearful of the prospects of even further decline, if not fearful of death itself. Such does not have to be the case, thank God, for as Christians we can choose not to “lose heart.” We can instead cherish and nurture the ongoing renewal of the inner nature, which is truly the foretaste of the renewal our bodies will eventually experience. If humans would attend to the health of the inner nature with the same diligence as we try to keep the outer nature healthy and free of disease, we would have greater confidence in the future.

Cherishing the inner renewal will not make the outer decay stop altogether, although it might have some salutary effects on our physical health. We will still need the outer nature renewed through the resurrection, but we will be better able to cope with the frustrations and difficulties of the present if we know we have such a future. And our confidence for that future will be encouraged by recognizing the present inner renewal. Then, as we remember our future, we will be able to realize that our present trouble, whatever its nature, is “slight momentary affliction” compared with “an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” (vs. 17). The descriptive terms used here are relative: Paul can call his troubles “slight” or “light” (NIV) only in comparison to the “weight” of future glory. (Take a glance at 11:23-29 to see if you would call Paul’s troubles “light”? See also Rom. 8:18.)

When Paul says that “we look not at what can be seen,” he does not mean that we ignore visible reality. Indeed, Paul has just plainly admitted the “wasting away” of the outer nature. Rather, Paul means that we “do not keep looking at, or gazing at” the outward and visible reality. We know it’s there; we recognize what’s happening; but we don’t let it become the total
preoccupation of our minds and hearts. We don’t let present afflictions keep us from seeing what there is to see for those who stand before Jesus as the “unveiled.”

Having the perspective of faith does not mean we ignore the obvious (such as sickness, mortality, grief, loss, problems of various kinds). The perspective of faith sees more than the obvious, not less. The “unveiled” are able to see more than most people, not less. It is a great disservice to the Christian faith and to people to tell them that faith means denying the presence of the problem. To the contrary, faith can speak frankly about the problem because it is confident of the solution. Christian faith is not confidence in the power of positive thinking, or some kind of magic for making problems disappear. Christian faith is confidence in the power and purposes of God—power that is sufficient and purposes that are good. The power is not ours (4:7); the sufficiency is not ours (3:5-6). But in the presence of God, which we can know today, we experience a power which is sufficient for today and forever. In experiencing God’s life-giving purposes today (4:10-11, 16) we become confident of the goodness of God’s purposes for us for the eternal future.

The perspective of faith, then, does not make us blind to troubles nor to anything else that is temporary. Indeed, we see these things better, more clearly, because we are focused on “what cannot be seen,” which is eternal (vs. 18; see also Heb. 11:1). Only when we see the temporary in the light of eternity do we see it clearly. Temporary things don’t necessarily lose all their importance in the light of eternity, but they certainly take on a different importance—their true importance rather than the false importance we often ascribe to them. There is, perhaps, no better example of this changed perspective than the one we see here in the first half of 2 Corinthians 5—the true purpose and value of the human body.

Paul describes our present body as an “earthly tent” (5:1). The imagery conveys a sense of being vulnerable as well as of being temporary. But a tent is a shelter, a place to inhabit, and certainly better than nothing. But “tent” is appropriate, as we have to admit, for the human experience is that this body does not endure. So is it of no value in the eternal scheme of things?

Actually, the value (and the purpose) of the “tent” we live in now is seen better by putting it into eternal perspective (provided we let God’s word inform us about his purposes for eternity). The “tent” in which we now live will be destroyed by death, but it will be replaced by “a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (vs. 1). The imagery of a “building” or a “house” certainly communicates more substance (not less) than a “tent.” God wants us to have a better place to inhabit! God’s intention from the beginning (Genesis 2:7) has been for human beings to have bodies. The fact that death and vulnerability to disease and injury now plague us does not change God’s intention that his children have bodies adequate to express the fullness of life that he wants to give us. The body we have now is not sufficient for that fullness, so it must be replaced with something better, more substantial, something “eternal” rather than frail and temporary.

So how does this affect our evaluation of the human body? In two paradoxical ways. On the one hand, we should honor the body as part of God’s gift and will for our existence as human beings. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, our body is meant to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. Right now, it’s a “tent,” so it won’t make a very good temple for very long, but it still should be treated
with the respect due to any structure serving as a temple dedicated to God’s glory. This tent will need to be replaced with the eternal building, but in the meantime it’s the best temple we have with which to honor God. In contrast to this view, many Greeks in Paul’s day said that the body is a tomb, from which the immortal spirit needs to escape. Obviously to regard the body as a temple means treating and using it differently than you would if you think it’s a tomb.

On the other hand, if the body is meant to be a temple, it is not meant to be worshiped--as seems to be the case so much in our society which idolizes sexuality, youth, and good looks. This body, which is only a tent, cannot satisfy the hungers of the heart which have been distorted into selfish indulgence, bringing with it inevitable frustration and emptiness of soul. Our bodies are not divine, and we can’t expect them to give us eternal satisfaction. Despite their limitations, however, we can use our bodies to glorify God, whose intention is ultimately to give us bodies adequate for fully and endlessly glorifying God as the giver of life.

In some ways, our contemporary culture is like the Corinthians’ Greek outlook. To an extraordinary extent, the ancient Greeks appreciated the beauty and strength of the human body; yet, ironically, they thought of immortality as a bodiless existence in some “spirit form.” Their Greek viewpoint (very non-biblical in this regard) was why Paul had to argue so forcefully for the reality of our future resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. (They apparently had accepted the message of Jesus’ resurrection but not their own! Note also how some Greeks at Athens had laughed scornfully at Paul’s message precisely at the point where he spoke of resurrection of the body--see Acts 17:32.) Here again, in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul is presenting a very realistic picture of our future habitation of a real, tangible body. The body we are going to have is more like a “building” compared with the present body which is more like a “tent.” And Paul speaks of this so confidently that he uses the present tense: “we have” (vs. 1).

Having confidence for such a glorious (and substantial) future in some ways heightens our frustrations with the present body, so that “in this tent we groan” (vs. 2) under the “burden” of our present limitations and vulnerabilities (vs. 4). The groaning is not totally a negative expression, however, since it is precisely the groaning for something which we confidently expect: our new and better bodies, “our heavenly dwelling” (vs. 2). Unlike the typical Greek’s aspiration for a disembodied spiritual existence in the future, Paul says we Christians long “to be further clothed,” not left as “unclothed” or “naked” spirits” (vss. 3-4; cf. 1 Cor. 15:53-54). We don’t expect to make do forever without a body; we expect a better body, better equipment with which to express life as God continues to give it, not less. Our future life is not a diminished existence but an enhanced one. (Again we might refer to Paul’s powerful and lengthy argument for the basis of this expectation in 1 Cor. 15. We are to expect a body like the one Jesus had after his resurrection. See also Phil. 3:21; Rom. 8:22-23.)

When viewed from a merely human perspective, without the testimony of Scripture or the Spirit, it looks like the present--when we are alive--must be better and fuller than the future after death has defeated our present mode of living. From the perspective of Scripture and the Spirit, and supremely as demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus, things look entirely different. Instead of earthly life being defeated or “swallowed up” by death, it’s the other way around: the mortal is “swallowed up by life” (vs. 4). That means life is bigger; life is stronger; life wins, because God wins, in Christ and in all those who are in Christ. That’s our confidence--not some wishful
thinking about “somehow” surviving death and continuing on in a spiritual state, but death being overcome completely and comprehensively, in every aspect of our being, including the body.

Exactly when we will receive our new bodies is not clear from this passage. Some read the present tense “have” in vs. 1 as indicating that we receive the new body immediately as we leave this body at the time of death. Others, pointing to vs. 8 of this same chapter, and noting that the NT elsewhere consistently connects the resurrection of believers with the return of Christ (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:23), understand the NT as teaching a disembodied, spiritual (but conscious and blessed) existence in the presence of Christ while awaiting the restoration of the body at the time of Christ’s return. To some extent, philosophical viewpoints about the nature of time and eternity shape these different interpretations. There is room for differences of opinion on this detail. The main point in this passage is not whether the new body is received immediately; the main point is how confident we can be of receiving it and, further, how this confidence for our future affects the way we live in the present.

Paul connects our present experience with our future hope in 5:5. God is the one “who has prepared us” for life in the better body, and he “has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” Our experience of the Spirit in the present is key to our expectation for the future, because the Spirit gives life (remember 3:6). The Spirit who already, continually renews “our inner nature” (4:16) will eventually give eternal life to our mortal bodies (Rom. 8:11). Our present experience of God’s life-giving Spirit is our “guarantee” of our future life, as the work of the same Spirit.

The word translated in the NRSV as “guarantee” (Greek: arrabon) can also be rendered as “pledge” or “deposit” (NIV) or “earnest” (KJV). Anyone who has bought a house understands what is meant by “earnest money.” When used in a commercial context, that is exactly what arrabon means, which is why it is also translatable as “down payment.” The connotation of “deposit” or “earnest” or “down payment” is that the portion already delivered is truly a part of the whole, which serves to promise the delivery of the whole. The Holy Spirit has not been given to us simply to keep us encouraged until we receive our future life; the Holy Spirit is our future life being experienced already (although incompletely). When we receive our new bodies, it will be the continuation of the life already begun in us now by the Holy Spirit’s presence. Thus, the Spirit is God’s arrabon; he has already made a deposit of the life he intends to give us in its fullness. This term, arrabon, was earlier encountered in 2 Cor. 1:21-22. It was not explicit there what was being guaranteed. Here in ch. 5, it is seen clearly to be the resurrected, glorified body. (Paul uses the word again in Eph. 1:14. In Rom. 8:23 he uses a different word picture to make the same point when he calls the Holy Spirit the “firstfruits.” In that context Paul also mentions groaning for the eventual “redemption of our bodies.”)

Naturally we have questions we wish Paul had addressed here. We might wish he had given us more details about the capacities or the appearance of our new bodies. But Paul does not dwell on the nature of the new body; rather, he returns to the issue of confidence and perspective for the way we live now. Notice how the declaration of vs. 6 is based on the expectation and experience described in vss. 1-5. Verse 6 begins with “therefore” (NIV) or “so” (NRSV). Because of our confident expectation for the future, “we are always confident.”
Yes, it is true, we are “away from the Lord,” in the sense that we do not perceive him as fully as we will in the future (see Col. 3:3-4; 1 John 3:2). Christ is present with us spiritually, but that means we must “walk by faith, not by sight” (vs. 7), a limitation which we will not have forever. Right now we believe in Christ’s promise of our resurrection; we do not see its fulfillment with our physical eyes. Because of our body’s evident vulnerability and temporary nature, we could well wish with Paul to be “at home with the Lord” even it means being “away from the body” until the time of the resurrection (vs. 8). The presence of Jesus is more valuable than physical life (cf. Psa. 63:3), because ultimately the presence of Jesus is the source of all life—physical as well as spiritual!

So, boiling everything down to the most essential matters, what should be our manner of life now? Paul says we should be confident (vs. 6), but he also says we should be focused on pleasing the Lord (vss. 9-10). As important as our physical health is to us, the most important aim is not keeping this body alive, which cannot live forever unless it is changed as only Christ can change it. On the other, the “aim to please” the Lord is an aspiration, a goal, a focus that we can have today and forever, with or without this present body. Having such an aim is the focus that gives us the confidence about which Paul keeps speaking. One reason we Christians are so often lacking in our confidence is that we are, more fundamentally, lacking this focus. We are scattered in our attentions by trying to please ourselves and others, rather than trying to please the Lord (which always includes serving others, even if it does not always please them!).

In view of our present body’s temporary nature, it only makes good sense to invest our efforts in an enterprise that will outlast this body and which will be the energizing power for our future body. Pleasing the Lord is the appropriate aim of the way we conduct our lives in the present body, and it is the way we will live forever, in a body which cannot die. Pleasing the Lord with our present body reflects our confident expectation that God will eventually give us such an immortal body.

Pleasing the Lord with our present body also reflects our belief that we will in fact be held accountable for what we do with this body and our earthly opportunities (vs. 10). Notice that Paul specifically mentions here that we will be recompensed “for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.” The consistent biblical perspective is that the body is meant to be used for good, meant to be used for God’s glory, and meant to serve the purposes God had in mind when he created humanity in the first place. The fact that we need to receive new and better bodies for these purposes to be fulfilled completely does not diminish the moral significance of the present body; it actually confirms its moral significance. God created us to be physical beings as well as intellectual, spiritual, and social beings. God’s steadfastness in his purposes for our physical being is shown by the resurrection of Jesus’ body from the grave. Who we are meant to be in God’s purposes includes our physical selves. It matters to God what we do as physical beings, because our bodies matter to him.

“Tents” though we are at present, we are called to be like the “tent” of the OT tabernacle, sanctified and dedicated to God’s glorious revelation and presence in the world. That, in turn, is our preparation for an eternal destiny as “buildings” in which the glory of God will shine forever.
Questions from LessonMaker by NavPress

2 Corinthians 4:1-18 - Treasures in Jars of Clay
OPEN IT
1. What are some things or people in which you have a lot of faith?

EXPLORE IT
2. How did Paul respond to his opponents' accusations? (4:2)
3. Who is the god of this age? (4:4)
5. How did Paul contrast his own weakness with God's power? (4:8-9)
6. What did Paul call his sufferings? (4:10)
7. How did Paul encourage the Corinthians to carry on despite difficulty? (4:16-18)

GET IT
8. What elements of the Christian faith that we cannot see are central to our life with Christ?
9. What makes it difficult for us to fix our attention and hope on God?

APPLY IT
10. What do you want to remember the next time you feel discouraged?
11. How could you encourage another Christian who is confused or bogged down by the cares of life?

2 Corinthians 5:1-10 - Our Heavenly Dwelling
OPEN IT
1. What do you imagine heaven will be like?

EXPLORE IT
2. To what kind of tent did Paul refer? Why? (5:1)
3. For what purpose has God made us? (5:4-5)
4. How does the Spirit guarantee what is to come? (5:5)
5. What future realities motivated Paul to please the Lord in all he said and did? (5:8-10)
6. What should be the believer's goal? (5:9)
7. Who will be judged by Christ? (5:10)
GET IT
8. What does it mean to live by faith and not by sight?

9. How does this passage give us hope for believers who have passed away?

10. How should we regard death?

APPLY IT
11. How can you prepare yourself today to face the judgment seat of Christ?
LESSON FOUR
The Ministry of Reconciliation
2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2

We saw in last week’s lesson that human beings—even the most “spiritual” ones—are weak vessels (“clay jars” and “tents”). The weakness of humans is seen all the more in contrast to the power of God, who will ultimately give us stronger, better bodies with which to serve and glorify him. In this week’s lesson, we will concentrate more attention on the purpose of God’s presence and power in the midst of his weak people. Throughout this entire epistle Paul is dealing with the nature of Christian ministry—specifically his own, which had been the object of criticism and ridicule by some in Corinth. In explaining and defending his own ministry, Paul provides some truly profound insights into the nature of Christian spirituality, especially in contrast to the worldly or “fleshly” ways we humans often try to define “being spiritual.”

The Ministry of Reconciliation (5:11-20)
Notice the “therefore” (NRSV; “since,” NIV) with which this paragraph begins. Everything we read in 2 Corinthians is best understood within the larger context of Paul’s dealings with this church over a period of years. In particular, the history of the rivalries addressed in 1 Corinthians is part of the background for 2 Corinthians as well, particularly for why Paul has to devote so much attention to defending his own ministry and defining true, spiritually sound ministry in general. While we cannot hope to keep all of that in mind at every point in teaching this book, at the very least we need to see 5:11 in connection with vs. 10 and the general context of thought leading up to this point.

Verse 10 mentioned the certainty of accountability at the judgment for every person. The wording of vs. 10 particularly tied in with the discussion of the importance of the body (4:16-5:10). The mention of judgment ties in strongly with what Paul will now discuss: the motive and goal of Christian ministry.

The first motive Paul identifies is “the fear of the Lord.” In light of the judgment and ultimate accountability for the way we have lived, everyone should have an appropriate fear for our Creator and Judge, the Lord God Almighty. That is an important motive for examining our own lives but also for trying “to persuade others” to repent of wickedness and put their trust in Jesus.

The fear of God is still the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10), in the New Testament as well as in the Old, and even today, although our cultural conditioning makes us quite uncomfortable with the notion of fearing God. We feel much more comfortable, and feel surer of a positive reception by our peers, when we talk about God’s love for us. And of course we need to talk about (and show) God’s love with patience and persistence. There’s a good question, however, how much we can really appreciate God’s love if we lack appreciation of the reasons God should be reverently feared.

One indispensable element of a proper fear of the Lord is the recognition that our very existence (even our next breath) is God’s gift. When we take life for granted, when we take good things for granted, when we assume that life and enjoyment are ours somehow by right or just by “nature,” we ignore the fundamental basis for giving thanks to God, for worshiping him as the
Provider of all we enjoy, and for “fearing” him in the proper way. (Recall that the refusal to give God glory and to give him thanks are at the root of all human iniquity. See Rom. 1:21.) When we remember that life and all good things come from God, we not only remember to thank him; we realize that none of these things necessarily had to be this way. Almighty God could have done whatever he wanted with his universe, and he made us! He could have done whatever he wanted with us, but he chose to redeem us! Among other things, a proper fear of God is nourished by realizing that it did not have to be this way, and it does not have to continue! If for no other reason, we should fear God because of his incomprehensible power (the lesson Job learned in chs. 38-42), against which we are helpless to fight.

Just to realize that we don’t have to exist in order for God to have a perfectly satisfactory universe should put some of the fear of God in us. Further to realize that, having given us existence, God has every right to evaluate how we use life and the other resources he gives us should bring the fear of the Lord to the kind of focus that Paul has in 2 Cor. 5:10-11. Precisely at this point, of course, we encounter the biggest obstacle in our society to a proper fear of the Lord--the issue of accountability and judgment.

We don’t like being accountable to one another, and we often endure it only to the extent that it is unavoidable in order to make a living, achieve a goal, or perhaps just stay out of trouble. We carefully guard our lives from further intrusion by authorities trying to tell us how to live, or trying to hold us accountable for things for which we don’t wish to answer to anyone, such as how we spend our leisure time or our money. We certainly don’t easily like being accountable to God, whose interests are too comprehensive, touching every aspect of our lives, and whose knowledge of our lives is altogether too thorough. I mean, don’t I get some space of my own?

Well, yes, I do get some space, not only in the large number of things that God leaves entirely to my personal choice (what color will I wear today?) but, more importantly, in the grace with which God treats me. God allows us choices, and he allows us the consequences of our choices, but he also delights in providing redemption for those who have made bad choices and now cry out to him for intervention. That God does not have to do this should cause me to fear him; that he chooses to do so should cause me to love him. I come back to my point: I don’t know whether we can fully appreciate God’s love if we lack appreciation for the reasons God should be feared.

Now we haven’t gotten very far in the passage for this week’s lesson, and this mention of the fear of the Lord is just one of many important things Paul will discuss. But I have devoted this much attention to just these few words because the fear of the Lord is a fundamental premise of Paul’s understanding of the ministry of reconciliation. Many in our culture are attracted to the language of reconciliation (and properly so) because of the connotations of healing, restoring, and caring for persons and relationships. We are right to want these things, but we are foolish to think we can have genuine reconciliation with God and with the righteous order of God’s kingdom without allowing ourselves to be re-educated on the vital necessity of fearing God and respecting his righteousness. When we fear God as we should, we will love him as we should, and the gospel will truly sound like “good news.”
Paul did not need to dwell as long as we have on the topic of the fear of the Lord, perhaps because he did not need to persuade the Corinthians (or anyone else in the ancient world) of the coming judgment and our accountability to the Creator. Instead, having mentioned judgment and the fear of God (vss. 10-11), Paul reverts to his main theme—defending the integrity and honesty of his ministry in Corinth. Paul acknowledges that God knows his motive, and he trusts that the Corinthians do also (vs. 11). Other would-be spiritual leaders “boast in outward appearance,” in outward impressiveness, but Paul knows that God looks on “the heart” (vs. 12), and he hopes that the Corinthian believers will do the same. If they look at the heart, the motive, rather than making surface comparisons between Paul and other favorites, they will appreciate Paul more than they do. More importantly, they may be more careful about allowing themselves to come under the influence of others whose motives are not so generous but rather selfish.

Under the influence of Paul’s rivals and critics, some in Corinth seem to have begun to question whether Paul was “beside himself” or even “out of his mind” (cf. NIV), or at least behaving in an imbalanced manner. How can Paul defend himself against that charge? “If I’m out of my mind, or over-excited, it’s for God’s sake,” he says (vs. 13). Notice that Paul does not say that he is out of his mind or over-reacting. He’s simply saying that however it may appear to others (looking at outward appearances), heart-felt concern for God’s purposes is what is really moving Paul. On the other hand, some (including Paul) think that he is in his right mind and is being quite reasonable in his conduct and words to the Corinthian church (“it is for you,” vs. 13; cf. 1:23).

Whatever their opinion of Paul’s state of mind, Paul wants his readers to know that what is truly moving him is “the love of Christ” (vs. 14). The love of Christ could mean either Christ’s love for us or our love for him; it could also mean the love that Christ inspires and enables us to have for one another. In this case, we probably need to hear all three of these elements in Paul’s words: it is because Christ loves us that we can love him and love one another. And in this context it would be impossible to separate Paul’s motive in loving God and serving the Corinthians from Christ’s motive in giving his life that Paul and all of us might live. In this context, “the love of Christ” is truly comprehensive as the motive behind and the motive expressed in the Christian ministry of reconciliation.

We are not left to our imaginations to define “the love of Christ” according to what we might like it to be. No, the reality of the love of Christ has been revealed in a once-for-all-people sacrifice which Jesus made for us. The ministry of reconciliation is definitively and unalterably shaped by the nature of this love and the nature of the need addressed by Christ’s sacrifice. This love is what “urges us on” (vs. 14, NRSV), or “compels us” (NIV). The language Paul uses here indicates being left with no alternative, having no choice but to go in this direction, being “hemmed in” and “under constraint.” Once we have seen the truth about the cross which Paul declares here, we too will know that some options are simply not open to us, especially any option to re-define God’s provision and method for reconciliation and our responsibility for carrying out the ministry of reconciliation.

The defining truth is this: “one died for all” (vs. 14). When you look at Jesus as someone who died for you, you have to look at him differently than you would otherwise. When you see him as someone who died for “all,” you have to look at everyone differently! Everyone is someone that someone has died for; and that someone who died is the same one for everyone. Can you
see already how this becomes the foundation for ministering reconciliation? Can you see how, in
effect, it leaves us no choice? We have to be for reconciliation. The Power greater than all the
powers of the universe has thus provided for reconciliation; we cannot oppose it for someone
else without refusing it for ourselves. Truly we are “hemmed in” (see also Matt. 6:14-15).

If everyone is someone for whom someone died, it is because everyone is someone who needed
such a sacrifice. If this is the price that was necessary, observe how this informs our
understanding not only of the value of each person but also of the debt of each person, including
ourselves. The cross constrains our opinion of ourselves and of our neighbors. Everyone needs
forgiveness and God has provided it for everyone.

The fact that the Savior had to die in order to save us shows us what we needed to be saved
from--the power of death and sin. If our Savior had to die to save us, he was saving us from
death. His death was for us; his death is our death. “One died for all; therefore, all have died.”
Jesus did not do this for me more than for you; nor was it less for anyone than it was for another.
[Like John Wesley, I think the very worst error of Calvinism as a system is the non-biblical
notion of “limited atonement”—that Jesus died only for “the elect,” those predestined to be
saved. The NT is quite clear that Jesus died for everyone (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; etc.); it is just
as clear that everyone will not accept the provision. That refusal in no way diminishes the power
of the provision; in fact, it reveals the just condemnation of those who persist in rebellion. You
could hardly be blamed for refusing something which was not offered to you!]

Seeing other people in the light of Jesus’ cross changes the way we see them. For Paul, the cross
provided the message (1 Cor. 1:18, 23-24; 2:2) and the motivation (2 Cor. 5:14) for the ministry
of reconciliation. The cross is the heart of the message because Jesus died as God’s Lamb,
substituting himself for us. Because the death he died was for us, it was our death, if we will
receive that verdict on our sins (see Rom. 6:2-10; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3). In that sense, Jesus is
both our substitute (by the grace of God) and our representative: He died for us, and his death is
our death to sin.

Here is a good place to repeat a point from last week’s lesson: The process involves death, but
the purpose is life (e.g., 4:10). This is seen again here in 5:15: Jesus “died for all, so that those
who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (the
resemblance to Gal. 2:20 is striking). God’s purpose in Jesus’ death is a new kind of life, not
only the immortal body with which Jesus emerged from the tomb but the new freedom that we
have to live for God’s purposes. By Jesus’ death we are set free from the power of sin and
selfishness; we are freed to be what we were created for--for God’s holy fellowship and eternal
glory!

This is what we try to persuade others to embrace (vs. 11). This is what the love of Christ
motivates us to do--to live for Jesus and to encourage others likewise to abandon the deadly ways
of selfishness and live in the true freedom of fulfilling our God-given purpose. Indeed, since “all
died,” the only way to live is to live for Jesus. Every other way of “living” leads to death. The
way to live for Jesus is by dying to self, but this way leads to life.
Paul says the cross changes our view of everyone. “From now on” (5:16) we have to view them differently—as people for whom Jesus died, as people who needed such a Savior. Seeing by the light of the cross, we no longer see others “from a human point of view” (NRSV), or “from a worldly point of view” (NIV), or “according to the flesh” (more literally, as in the NKJV). Usually in the NT, especially in Paul’s epistles, we tend to see the opposite of “according to the flesh” as “according to the Spirit” (e.g., Rom. 8). Here, the opposite of “according to the flesh” is “according to the cross of Jesus.” Paul does not use those exact words, but he is talking about how we see others now that we understand that Jesus died for them.

Paul also includes Jesus in this new perspective (vs. 16). At the time Paul wrote this (in the mid-50s A.D.), there were many still alive who had known Jesus during his earthly life and ministry. There were multiple hundreds who had seen him after his resurrection and before his ascension (1 Cor. 15:6). To have known Jesus “according to the flesh” (in the neutral sense of being acquainted with him during his earthly life) was a great privilege, to be sure, but Paul says the most important thing to know about Jesus is this: Jesus died for all, and he is the one for whom all should now live—this one who died and was raised for them. This is knowledge about Jesus which is open to everyone in the world. Even though we live in different places and different eras we can all equally know that Jesus died and was raised for us all.

Verse 17 is perhaps the best known verse in the entire epistle, certainly one of the most frequently memorized. That is appropriate, because it is such a vivid declaration of the new life we have “in Christ” and the comprehensiveness of the newness: “everything has become new!” We can take great encouragement from this verse for ourselves personally, even while we still “groan” while waiting for the new body (5:2-4). We need to apply the newness to ourselves in this way, but if we take the verse in its context we will also apply it to others.

The context of vs. 17 is Paul’s exposition on the motive and goal of the ministry of reconciliation. Everyone needed reconciliation; that’s why “one died for all” (vs. 14). The reconciliation provided enables everyone who receives it to do what they were really made for—live for Jesus (vs. 15). That’s why we have to look at everyone differently in light of the cross (vs. 16). God’s love for everyone, God’s provision for everyone, is made evident by the cross. By Jesus’ resurrection, in which life conquered death, a whole “new creation” is made available to everyone, which again changes the way we see everyone. (For an overhead I use for this, see the appendix for this lesson.)

Note that the new creation is available “in Christ.” This, of course, is Paul’s most familiar and concise expression for being a Christian. By faith we accept what God provided by grace: Christ’s death and resurrection for us. If we will allow Jesus’ death to be our death, he will let his life be our life. As the resurrected, immortal Lord, his life is “new creation.” Only eventually will we see this in our bodies, but we can experience the newness of life each day (see 4:16).

By breaking the power of sin and death over us, God has “reconciled us to himself through Christ” (vs. 18), that is, he has made the necessary adjustment in our relationship to him so that we can be what he wants us to be and do what he wants us to do. He has made possible a right
relationship in which we can receive the free and full flow of his life into our beings, already on a daily basis in our inner being, but eventually even to the point of our bodies being transformed. I use the word “adjustment” because reconciliation is about change. Paul is perfectly clear that God has accomplished this reconciliation for us and then has “given us the ministry of reconciliation,” which means we have the privilege and responsibility to tell others what God has done and what he wants to do: God has made it possible for everyone to be changed. The “new creation” in Christ is available to all, which means everyone can be changed. That’s the meaning of reconciliation in this context.

Unfortunately, we have to say, sometimes human beings with particular agendas try to give old words new meanings, and sometimes they succeed. An example with which everyone is familiar is the word “gay,” which meant happy or light-hearted until it became the chosen title for homosexual activists. Now “gay” is used to mean homosexual, even by people who oppose the agenda of the “gay community.” The word has been successfully re-defined in common usage. I certainly hope that a similar fate does not fall to the word “reconciliation” and related words such as “reconciling.” The title “reconciling” has been adopted by some in the United Methodist Church (and other denominations) to designate their agenda of persuading others to approve and support the “life-style” of practicing homosexual persons. Some congregations have voted to declare themselves “reconciling” congregations. This political move was countered by an evangelical move to have congregations declare themselves to be “transforming” congregations, i.e., committed to welcome homosexual persons to come to church (for the same reasons we all need to come to church) but not to bless their behavior, or to put them in places of spiritual leadership such as ordained elder so long as they were unrepentant and involved in homosexual practice (not to be confused with having homosexual attraction—all of us are attracted to some sin!). It was, probably, mostly a good thing that the higher authorities of the UMC eventually instructed all congregations and conferences to stop adopting such titles for themselves. But one really insidious thing about this whole episode is the distortion of biblical language in pursuit of a non-biblical agenda.

In this passage (2 Cor. 5), reconciliation is transformation! To accept God’s reconciliation is to accept one’s need for a Savior who died to set me free from my selfish, destructive ways, so that I could live for him in a totally new way. Those in recent years who have called for a “reconciling movement” have been asking for change, to be sure, but change in standards rather than change in behavior. But Jesus did not come to change the standards (see Matt. 5:17ff.); he came to change people. To refuse the transformation of our character and behavior is to refuse reconciliation with God. We cannot produce the transformation in our own strength, but neither can we receive the reconciliation if we refuse its implications—we all need to be changed in radical ways (“one died for all”).

If reconciliation means to accept God’s “adjustments,” his transforming work (which is a process over time), the “ministry of reconciliation” (vs. 18) means to offer others the opportunity to be likewise transformed. To offer them acceptance and approval of what God says is wrong is not “reconciliation” in the sense Paul is talking about. That is not a “reconciling” ministry; that is an “accommodating ministry.” Perhaps it would be better described as “surrender” or “capitulation” to the moral confusion of our culture.
Having said all this about the misuse of language by activists for the homosexual cause, we should hasten to add that we need to apply the principle to ourselves just as strictly. If our weakness and struggles lie in other areas (for many it is heterosexual, but it can also be greed, jealousy, anger, etc.), we need to understand that the reconciling work of Jesus is meant to change our lives. To whatever extent our lives do not yet reflect a “new creation,” to that extent we still need to be reconciled, which means to be adjusted to God’s way of doing things. Are all our ways like God’s ways? If not, we are still candidates for further adjustment, for further “reconciliation.”

Of course being a candidate for further adjustment of our own lives does not relieve us of the responsibility for helping to spread the word about what God has done to make reconciliation available for everyone. Thus people who are still in the process of being renewed (4:16) are already entrusted with the message and ministry of reconciliation (5:18-19). While still being candidates for further reconciliation, we are already “ambassadors for Christ,” who extend the appeal to others to “be reconciled to God” (vs. 20).

Part of the reason candidates for further reconciliation are commissioned to be ambassadors for reconciliation is that we simply cannot wait until everything in our lives is in perfect shape before we reach out in reconciling love to others. After all, until the return of Christ or our departure through death, we will continue to be “clay pots” (4:7) with limitations and flaws of our own (remembering, however, that limited clay pots can still be useful). There may be a still more fundamental reason that candidates for further reconciliation need to become involved in the ministry of reconciliation to others. It seems that becoming involved in God’s reconciling outreach to others is integral to our own total reconciliation to God’s ways.

If God is the kind of God who comes to us as Jesus came to us, what kind of people will we be when our ways are fully like God’s ways? The more we are reconciled to God’s ways, the more we will be committed to being reconciling persons. The ministry of reconciliation is not just about repeating the message; it’s about being this kind of person, living this way, even joining Jesus’ dying so that others may live (remember 4:10-12; also see First John 3:16). When our hearts are like God’s heart (when our hearts are reconciled to his), we will see other people as those for whom Jesus died and was raised (5:14-15). Knowing that the blood of Jesus has already made atonement for their sins, we will extend the offer of reconciliation to them, “not counting their trespasses against them” (5:19), i.e., not letting their sins be a barrier that keeps us from going to them, talking to them, reaching out to them. (They can, of course, choose their sins over the offer of forgiveness and transformation, but their sins should not keep the offer from being made, anymore than it kept Jesus from making the provision. See Rom. 5:6-8; Christ died for the weak and ungodly--us!)

We who have received the message of reconciliation have, by receiving it, been commissioned to spread the reconciliation. The healed become the healers. The forgiven become the forgiving (see Matt. 6:14-15). The subjects of reconciliation become the ambassadors of reconciliation, yet without ceasing to be candidates for further reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness. This is borne out by the simple observation that Paul directs his ambassadorial appeal here to the Christians in Corinth, people who had already received justifying grace and manifestations of the
spiritual gifts. To believers in Jesus, Paul writes, “On behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). Paul is saying, in effect, “Let God change your life still more than he has. God hasn’t finished his work in you yet; let him continue to change you until he has finished the work.” This is Paul’s appeal, which can be heard against the background of all the disputes between Paul and some in the church there, but it is also God’s appeal, Christ’s appeal through his servant, Paul. The goal is not merely reconciliation between people who have been at odds with one another; the goal is to “be reconciled to God.”

When persons are reconciled to God, they will seek reconciliation with one another. If persons seem to be irreconcilable, someone (perhaps more than one) is resisting or, at least, not seeing what God can do and wants to do. Since all Christians still need reconciling with God in some areas of their lives, this should not surprise us. Nor should we be dismayed over the fact that mistakes and sins of the past continue to have consequences in the present (“eggs can’t be unscrambled”). But at any point we can choose to be reconciled to God’s viewpoint and to God’s plan to redeem and renew our entire existence (5:17). At any point we can choose to let God give us a new attitude toward other persons. At every point, God’s reconciling process for our lives includes involving us as ambassadors for reconciliation to others.

The Basis for Reconciliation (5:21)
Wherever we are in the process, and even if we have not started the process, the resource for the reconciliation we need and the reconciliation we offer to others is the same: the once-for-all-time sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. Verse 21 is one of the more succinct statements in the New Testament about what God accomplished for us in Jesus’ death: “For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [in Christ] we might become the righteousness of God.” Every word of this profound sentence is important. Let’s note just some of the more important, starting with the simple and proceeding to the more difficult:

“For our sake”—The motive was love and the fulfillment of God’s good purposes for us.

“who knew no sin”—Jesus recognized sin, of course, but he never committed it (Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5). He did not “know” sin in the experiential sense of knowing what it’s like to commit it.

“so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”—God’s purpose was and is to change us, to make our ways like his ways, to make us righteous in thought, word, and deed. Note that this is “in him,” that is, in Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30).

“he made him to be sin”—This is the most challenging part of the verse. Was Jesus turned into sin? What would that mean? Without wishing to over-simplify the issue, I would first suggest that a straightforward approach would say that God let Jesus be treated the way sin (and we as sinners) deserved to be treated so that we could be treated as righteous. That’s not quite enough, however, since it is clear that God’s intention involves more than treating us as righteous; he wants us truly to become righteous. Still, “made him to be sin” does not have to mean that Jesus became sin in the literal sense that Jesus’ holy essence was replaced by sin’s essence. It would be very adequate (and more in keeping with the whole biblical teaching about sin and sacrifices for sin) to say that Jesus was the “stand-in” for our sins. In the crucial moment when the
righteous wrath of God was poured out on our sin, Jesus “took the hit.” This was by God’s grace, for our sake. As I once heard a minister (Rev. Richard M. Freeman) say it as concisely as it can be said, “The Judge took the judgment on himself.”

Another approach taken by some interpreters is to translate “sin” in this passage as “sin offering,” i.e., Jesus became a sin offering rather than sin itself. That is possibly Paul’s intention, and it’s not that different from what I said in the previous paragraph. If Paul had wanted to say that, however, he could have made it quite explicit. It’s better to leave the translation as it is found in most English Bibles.

It is clear enough (if not from this verse, then certainly from the whole of the NT; see 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18) that Jesus, the all holy one who “knew no sin,” let the awful effects of sin—including its alienating effect of separating us from the awareness of God’s presence—come down upon him with all its dark terror. Certainly this would fit the somber yet restrained descriptions of Jesus’ death that we find in the Gospel accounts. It would also fit with the famous “cry of dereliction” or “cry of desolation” uttered by Jesus on the cross, quoting the opening words of Psalm 22 as his very own: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46)

In trying to interpret 2 Cor. 5:21, I would rather say too little than too much, for there are some popular interpretations of “made him to be sin” which create more problems than they solve. Whatever our interpretation of these words (or of the “cry of dereliction”), there are some things we need to remember and allow to limit our options.

The first thing to keep in mind and be sure not to violate is the truth of the incarnation. Jesus is the eternal, holy Word of God, who became a human being through the miraculous conception in the womb of Mary. From that moment on, the individual (cf. “indivisible”) Jesus is fully God and fully man—including the moment when he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When Jesus cries that cry, he is expressing what he is feeling, which is more than human words can describe. But he is experiencing this in order to save you and me, for he has taken on our sin and our dilemma caused by sin. He is crying our cry! We are the ones who had alienated ourselves from the life of God, and here on the cross is the giver of life dying in order to give us life again (“for our sake”).

If Jesus, fully God and fully man, is crying our cry of desperation and sense of abandonment, that means that God has come all the way to where we are at our lowest. If God is crying our cry that God seems to have left us, that means God has not left us. It means, instead, that God, in his willingness to reconcile us, is willing to experience the brokenness of our situation. By getting inside our brokenness, Jesus heals us. Only by getting to the bottom of it does he heal us from the bottom up. He does not stop being God to do this. Precisely at this point, if he is going to save us, he must be God. So because Jesus as God and man cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” we can know that God has not forsaken us. The power that separates (sin) has been defeated; the bridge has been built from God’s side to ours over the chasm our sins had created.

Jesus never stopped being God, even when crying this cry of abandonment. And he did not stop being human at any point either. It might be possible for someone to understand his “cry of
dereliction” as his humanity crying out, but I would prefer not to split the *individual* in such a manner. No, this is Jesus—fully God and fully man, but just one person—bearing the burden for all humanity as *only God* could do.

Another thing to remember in our reverent and cautious interpretation of 2 Cor. 5:21 and Matt. 27:46 is that, however we understand what Jesus was experiencing, we must understand that Jesus does not become, at any point, less than fully holy. I have heard some well intended interpretations of the cross which pictured God the Father as unable to look at what was happening to Jesus. There are a couple of very serious objections against such an interpretation: 1) in the OT sacrificial system, the sin sacrifice is characterized as “most holy,” so holy that it is contagious, making anything that touches it holy (see Leviticus 6:25-30). If the consecrated OT sacrifice for sin is that holy simply by virtue of God saying it is so, what about the very Word of God himself while acting as the supreme sacrifice for sins? Surely, if anything, he is more holy.

Indeed, the point most worth making is this. Jesus’ holiness is contagious, too, and stronger than our sins. That’s why when he comes into the company of sinners, he is not afraid that they will contaminate him! It tends to work the other way. Either we let him change us by the sheer force of his holiness, or we have to get away from him. And, when you think about it, his holiness has to be stronger than our sins, or there is no remedy for us.

One last thing I want to mention as a hedge against careless interpretation of 5:21. Whatever we understand by “made him to be sin” must not be allowed to subvert clear statements such as these: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9); and “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM” (literal translation of John 8:28); and “the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him” (John 8:29). Nowhere more than the cross was Jesus doing what pleased the Father; and there, more than anywhere, we see the heart of God revealed.

If Jesus on the cross is not the heart of God revealed, then what is the heart of God? Does Jesus reveal the Father? I have heard some say that God, in his holiness, could not bear to stay with Jesus while Jesus “became sin.” Then is God the Father more holy than Jesus, since Jesus was willing and able to bear what the Father could not?! Or perhaps Jesus loves us more than the Father since he was willing to endure what the Father would not! You can see how such ideas destroy the whole concept of revelation, especially the central truth that we know God in knowing Jesus. If Jesus loses his “godhood” or his holiness on the cross, then we don’t have a revelation of God in Jesus but a picture of what God would be like if only he were more like Jesus! This leads to utter confusion. Better by far to be restrained in what we try to say than to say such things. (See the appendix of this lesson for a summary I have used as an overhead.)

**The Time for Reconciliation (6:1-2)**
Still writing as ambassador for Jesus but also as a co-worker with Jesus, Paul exhorts us “not to accept the grace of God in vain” (6:1). How could that happen? By saying ‘yes’ to the offer but then not responding in the manner needed, or by beginning to respond but not continuing. We can say ‘yes’ with our mouths but ‘no’ with our lives. How can we keep that from happening? By recognizing that right now is when we have to respond--“now is the acceptable time; . . . now is the day of salvation!” (vs. 2, quoting Isa. 49:8). Now is when we have to respond, if we have
not done so yet. Now is when we have to continue to respond if we have already begun. Now is the only time we have.

Notice again that Paul is addressing this urgent entreaty to Christian believers (as he did when exhorting reconciliation, 5:20). It’s true, of course, that a non-believer needs to respond with repentance and faith to the gospel message, and “now is the acceptable time.” But Paul is saying this to people who have already repented, who have already confessed Jesus as Savior, and who have already experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. To us as much as to the Corinthian believers the exhortation comes to respond “now.” (This is very much like the emphasis in Hebrews 3:13 on responding to God “as long as it is called ‘today.’”)

One of the reasons (or excuses) why people sometimes put off making a response to God’s grace is the problem they say they have with other people: “the church is full of hypocrites” or “all the preacher talks about is money.” Knowing that some Corinthians have problems with him, Paul resumes the defense of his ministry right after the exhortation of vss. 1-2. He does not want his life to give anyone a reason for not receiving God’s grace. He does not want anyone to make Paul the issue, when Jesus is the real issue. If “now” is the time to respond to God’s grace, Paul does not want to be a hindrance to anyone. So, he says, “We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way” (vs. 3; “offense,” NKJV; “stumbling block,” NIV). We’ll look at that passage as part of next week’s lesson.

Questions from LessonMaker software by NavPress.

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2 - The Ministry of Reconciliation
OPEN IT
  1. When have you seen someone change in a significant way?

EXPLORE IT
  2. Why did Paul try to persuade others to follow Christ? (5:11)
    3. What motivated Paul? (5:14)
  4. Why did Christ die for everyone? (5:15)
  5. How did Paul change the way he looked at people? (5:16)
  6. What is true about every person in Christ? (5:17)
    7. How is a Christian an ambassador? (5:20)
    8. Why should we listen carefully to the message about Christ? (6:1-2)

GET IT
  9. How is it possible for us to be motivated both by the fear of the Lord and Christ's love?
  10. In what ways do people today receive the grace of God in vain?
11. How can you personally be involved in the ministry of reconciliation?

12. What difference does it make that Christians are counted as Christ's ambassadors?

13. Where is your ministry of reconciliation?

14. To whom are you an ambassador?

APPLY IT

15. What is one way you can represent Christ to your friends and coworkers this week?
The cross changes our view of God, our view of others’ *needs* our view of others’ *value*, and our needs and value.

The resurrection changes our view of *possibilities*—others’ possibilities and our own.

If God will and can do this for us . . .

The cross says he will. The resurrection says he can.

Thus, in Christ there is no hopeless case.
Jesus did not die as God-forsaken.
Jesus, as God, died for our sake.

Dying my death, he cried my cry.
Carrying my burden,
he uttered my desperation.

There on the cross was God,
healing the breach,
expressing the utter desolation
of the human predicament.

There was the King of Glory (Psa. 24:7-10),
entering into my situation
so that I can be in his presence,
so that I can be transformed by his glory
(1 Cor. 2:8; 2 Cor. 3:18).
After an extended discourse on the nature of Christian ministry (chs. 3-5), culminating in an exhortation to the Corinthian believers to be reconciled to God’s ways, Paul again focuses more directly on the issues of debate and division within the church. Beginning with 6:3, you can sense the very personal nature of Paul’s appeal to them. Yet it is more than just an appeal for them to “get along with Paul” or even to get along with one another; they need to respond to God’s call to be his holy people in the world. This is what God calls us to be, too. The whole point of reconciliation to God (5:20-21) and receiving the grace in God (6:1) is for us to become God’s holy people.

**Paul’s Hardships (6:3-10)**

In view of the price paid by Christ for our reconciliation (discussed in last week’s lesson), it might seem almost trivial to mention the price that his ambassadors (5:20) have to pay. But this is part of what it means to be included in Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation. As Paul had said earlier (4:10-12), he continued to pay a significant price for his commitment to evangelizing the Gentiles (see also Col. 1:24—“I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body”). Implicit in his mention of the hardships he had suffered is the appeal for the Corinthians not to make his sufferings in vain (6:1), which they would effectively do if they turned their backs on the gospel. More important, however, would be their effective nullifying of the grace of God which had been extended to them in Paul’s preaching.

Far from putting a stumbling block in their path, Paul has sought to open up the path for others to come to know Jesus, even though opening a path has caused him many hardships. In vss. 4-10, Paul describes in a general way some of what he has gone through and how he has done it, by mentioning personal and spiritual qualities along with the hardships. (In ch. 11, he will become more specific about some of the things he mentions here in general terms.) If Paul needs a “letter of recommendation” to give to the Corinthians (3:1-3; 4:2), these lines serve that purpose well.

Some of the hardships Paul experienced were conditions imposed on him by others; some are disciplines and acts of self-denial freely chosen for the sake of bringing the gospel to others. Verses 4 and 5 list things Paul has endured. Suddenly in vss. 6-7 he shifts to listing the spiritual qualities he has demonstrated in the midst of these trials. Any and all of these qualities would be worthy subjects of meditation, for these are the kind of spiritual and personal qualities we need if we are going to endure the long haul. Absence of any one of these makes us dangerously vulnerable and undermines our “staying power.” Especially we need the Holy Spirit (vs. 6, NIV; NRSV has “holiness of spirit”).

We might note one thing for future reference, because Paul will come back to it in a significant way: “the weapons of righteousness” (vs. 7). The “armor of God” passage in Ephesians 6 is a good cross-reference, but Paul will also mention the “weapons” again in 2 Cor. 10:4, in connection with the destruction of spiritual “strongholds.”
From listing spiritual qualities which we need in order to endure (vss. 6-7), Paul shifts again to list some of the contrasting opinions about him held by others (vs. 8f.) and then contrasting aspects of his own experience (vss. 9b-10).

We can easily imagine that Paul’s enemies outside the church would dishonor him and call him an impostor (vs. 8). The whole reason for writing this epistle, however, was that some within the church held such views of Paul. So Paul had to deal with the kind of contrasting opinions that all of us encounter to some extent, especially if we take any “high-profile” position as a leader in public matters, civic or spiritual: some people will like us; some people won’t. Try as we might (as we must) to be people of integrity, who “refuse to practice cunning” (4:2), some people may still regard us as impostors and distrust us.

Our responsibility is not principally to make everyone think well of us; our responsibility is to be, in the eyes of God, people of “honor,” “good repute,” and “true.” If some people think the opposite of us, we may just have to let them have their opinion while we continue to be true to God’s ways. If we are genuinely people of honor and integrity, some will like and appreciate us. They may even praise us. This too can be dangerous, if we allow people’s approval to be our most important standard. We don’t want to put an obstacle in anyone’s way (vs. 3), but the main reason for living with integrity is ultimately our accountability to God (5:10).

On the contrasts between dying and living, and punished (“beaten,” NIV) but not killed, see earlier in 4:10-12. Here Paul echoes the wording of Psalm 118:17-18.

Caring as he did about the unsaved, about his fellow Jews who did not trust Jesus (Rom. 9:1-3), and about the churches he had established in various cities (2 Cor. 11:28), Paul had plenty of reason to be “sorrowful” (6:10). At the same time, because of the glorious hope of the gospel, Paul was “always rejoicing” (as he encouraged others to do, Phil. 4:4). The paradox of the simultaneous presence of these contrasting emotions is part of the picture Paul gave us most succinctly in 4:7, when he described us as clay pots filled with glorious treasure.

Likewise, with the following contrasts in 6:10, it seems contradictory to be “poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” Of course Paul is thinking on two levels or in two aspects—the material and the spiritual, the outward and the inward. Paul was, at least at times, quite literally poor in the financial sense (see 2 Cor. 11:7-9, 27; 1 Cor. 4:11-12; Phil. 4:11-12). Yet his ministry enriched his hearers, as he followed the example of the Lord himself (see 2 Cor. 8:9; see also 1 Cor. 3:21-23).

**An Appeal for Holiness (6:11-7:1)**

Just before Paul gives perhaps the strongest warnings and admonitions in this epistle (6:14ff.), he reaffirms his genuine love and sincerity toward the Corinthians, and asks for a similar sincerity and openness from them (6:11-13). If there has been a problem between them (and there had been), Paul says it is due to feelings on their side, not his. There is no “restriction” (“withholding,” NIV) of affection from Paul toward them. He loves them just as much as ever.

The tone seems to change suddenly from 6:13 to 6:14, but in fact Paul is merely repeating and underlining previous instructions given in 1 Corinthians (e.g., 10:1-11:1) and, presumably, in the
“painful visit” and “tearful letter.” Although most of the church has responded obediently to the “tearful letter” and the ministry of Titus, some have not. Some continue to presume on their supposed “Christian liberty” by involvement in the fringes of idolatrous practices (such as going to feasts in pagan temples, 1 Cor. 10:7, 20) or by compromising with sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1-2, 9; 10:8).

The persistence of these issues in the Corinthian fellowship is more understandable, when we recall the Gentile background of many of them and the dominant pagan culture in the city. The issues were probably being exploited also by rival leaders within the church, especially those who wanted to replace Paul’s leadership with their own. If anyone in the church was not happy with Paul’s guidance on these matters, some aspiring leader might seek advantage by offering different guidance in order to gain a following. This is often how political leaders succeed, by finding out which way people want to go and then volunteering to lead them. That may work well enough in some dimensions, but what if people want something spiritual which is poison? Then the cooperative leader becomes an accomplice to suicide!

The stark and abrupt warning, “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers” (vs. 14, NRSV; cf. “unequally yoked,” NKJV), is often heard in connection with advice about marriage. It certainly has a valid application there, but this immediate context is not focused on that issue as such. Here Paul is principally referring to partnership with pagans in idolatrous practices, probably having to do with participation in meals at pagan temples (vss. 16-17). We might assume that Paul would caution against any close alliance with a non-believer, whether that be marriage or business partnership, but the point here has more to do with the personal behavior of the Christian. After all, the individual Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (vs. 16; also 1 Cor. 6:19), and so is the church corporately (1 Cor. 3:16, where “you” is plural).

Here in 2 Cor. 6:14-16, by asking a series of questions which should have obvious answers, Paul says, in effect, “Don’t try to play on both teams.” Righteousness and “lawlessness” (“wickedness,” NIV; see 1 John 3:4) are not on the same team! Neither are light and darkness, nor Christ and the devil (“Belial,” one of many names for Satan, transliterates a Hebrew word meaning “worthlessness” or perhaps “lawlessness”). If you cooperate with the agenda of evil by moral compromise, you are (to that extent) fighting against the values of the kingdom of God.

The sheer honor and privilege of being “the temple of the living God” (16), should be enough motivation to avoid anything having to do with idolatry—the honoring and serving of lifeless things which have been given undeserved value by humans. Why would we want to disgrace ourselves after being so honored by the Creator of everything? Indeed, why would we want to dishonor him?

God is the one who decided that he wanted us to be his people, to be his living temple. We have to say ‘yes,’ but we say ‘yes’ to a purpose God had before we said ‘yes.’ God’s initiative is brought out by the loose string of Old Testament quotations in vss. 16-18, which begins with “as God said.” The intention of God to “live in them and walk among them,” to “be their God,” and have us as “my people” (vs. 16) is God’s consistent purpose found in many places in the OT (including Lev. 26:12; Jere. 32:38; Ezek. 37:27). This often stated purpose could also be read as
God’s promise. But, like many promises, it is not unconditional. A response is required from us: “Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them” (vs. 17).

The word “therefore” introduces the appropriate human response to God’s initiative. Because God wants us to be his temple, his people, we can be, but we have to decide whether we want to be. Being “separate” from the world, at the very least, means wanting something different from what the world wants—since it is alienated from the purposes and life of God. If we are responding to God’s purposes, we should find ourselves out of step with the purposes which usually prevail in the world.

Why would Christian believers (professing belief in Jesus, seeking to honor him with words and actions) stay or become involved in idolatry to any extent? In the case of the first-generation Christians in Corinth, the answer probably had a lot to do with values and rituals with which they had grown up. Their upbringing and the culture still surrounding them incorporated rituals and celebrations at the temples into the very fabric of family and civic life. It would require a deliberate and sustained effort on the part of Gentile converts to Christ to break away and stay away from involvement in some activities associated with the temples. Even if you did not believe in those gods anymore, the social pressure would be significant. The temptation would be to go along with family and neighbors, to eat with them at the temple, even though your faith was now in Jesus rather than Zeus.

Adding to the strength of such temptations would be the “liberty” which some in Corinth professed and practiced to a dangerous degree. They had previously argued their case something like this: “Since we know that an idol is really no god at all, what does it matter whether I eat a meal there with family or neighbors?” Paul had already pointed out that such arguments overlooked the destructive effects of careless use of one’s liberty (1 Cor. 8). Such liberty, based on supposedly superior knowledge, was not informed by love but by pride (1 Cor. 8:1). Paul devoted a good portion of 1 Corinthians (chs. 8-10) to instructing the believers and appealing to them to show discretion and consideration in these matters. It probably worked with some in the church but obviously not with everyone (given the history after 1 Corinthians of the “painful visit,” the “tearful letter,” and now this section of 2 Corinthians). Some have persisted in disobeying the apostle’s guidance. Hence the strength of the warnings here.

So how does this apply to us today? We’re not likely to be invited to participate in a pagan ceremony, are we? Well, we might if we wandered into a “new age” worship service. More likely, however, is encountering a temptation to compromise our Christian values for the sake of social or business values. We may feel no temptation whatever to bow down before an image of stone or gold. But if we make significant sacrifices of some values for the sake of serving or obtaining another value, by our choices and actions we establish a hierarchy of values, the highest of which effectively serves as our “god.” If our real god is popularity or pleasure, we might downplay or set aside (at least temporarily) our devotion to Jesus in order to pursue what we really believe we need in order for life to be good—the approval of others, physical pleasure, or psychological comfort.

If someone’s real god is money or power, for another example, he might cut ethical corners on Thursday to serve that god—that value which he thinks he needs to make life good—then on
Sunday sing in the choir in the Christian church. This he could not do, however, if he truly realized that he himself is the temple of the living God. A Christian doesn’t just visit God on Sunday; God indwells him every day. If he does not realize this, or forgets it, he may compartmentalize his life and think that he is serving God satisfactorily enough, even though he does what he “has to do” to make his business profits or his power plays.

For us as much as for the Corinthian believers the exhortation is needed: “Come out from them, and be separate” (vs. 16). This does not mean that we should all withdraw into the desert and avoid contact with the people of the world. No, Jesus sends us into the world. But Jesus also prays for us and teaches us to be ‘in the world but not of it’ (John 17). Our light needs to shine before other people (Matt. 5:14-16). If our light is to shine, however, we will have to live by God’s agenda and not that of the world. We will have to seek the kingdom’s values in all that we do, including our involvement in human society and commerce.

The ultimate aim of Christian holiness is not to be different for difference’ sake. The aim is simply to be faithful to Almighty God who wants us to be his “sons and daughters” (vs. 8). Faithfulness to God will make us different, because we will be making our living, raising our families, doing our shopping, etc., as Christians. We have to do (and get to do) a lot of the same things that other people do, but with a truly different, ultimate object in mind. As temples of the living God, we were redeemed and are being transformed to glorify him, and not simply to please ourselves (remember 5:15). True sons and daughters will want, more than anything, to bring joy to the heart of our Father, who delights in us as his children. (In 6:17-18, Paul combines words from a number of OT texts, including Isa. 52:11 and 2 Sam. 7:14, which affirm God’s consistent desire for a loving relationship with his people. This loving relationship must also be an exclusive relationship, however. There is not room in our hearts to love the true God and serve the false gods of the world [Matt. 6:24].)

Even though a new chapter starts at 7:1, the thought is really continued from the previous verses, as you can see from the “since” with which vs. 1 begins. The “promises” referred to are the promises to have God as our God and to be his people (6:16), to be welcomed into God’s presence (6:17; cf. Matt. 5:8), and to be God’s sons and daughters (6:18). These wonderful promises make it worthwhile to pay any “price” we may have to pay in terms of the world’s misunderstanding or opposition. With these promises in mind, we should have plenty of positive motivation for cleansing ourselves “from every defilement of body [literally “flesh”] and of spirit.”

Unless we are willing to say ‘no’ to those things which defile us, we are not free to say a complete and full ‘yes’ to God. Without the ‘no’ on the one hand and the ‘yes’ on the other, we cannot truly pursue the goal of “making holiness perfect” or complete “in the fear of God.” Try as we might, saying ‘yes’ to the Lord and ‘yes’ to the world’s values and agendas at the same time simply will not work. Without the ‘negative’ work of holiness (cleansing ourselves from defiling influences), there cannot be a completion of the ‘positive’ work of holiness (full and free experience of being God’s beloved sons and daughters). And, again, as we discussed in connection with 5:11-20, the reverent fear of God is a necessary element in the full experience of God’s love.
Good Grief (7:2-16)

In 7:2 Paul resumes the appeal he began in 6:13, for the Corinthian church to be as generous in their attitude toward him as he is toward them. His conscience toward them is clear, that he has “wronged no one.” Later Paul will indicate that someone has “taken advantage of” (“exploited,” NIV) the church (11:20), but Paul has not. He affirms that he is willing to die for them (7:3). Not only does he have great affection for them; he has great confidence in them and is filled with joy over them (vs. 4). This may seem like a strange thing to say right after the stern words of 6:14-7:1, but Paul wants them to understand that the strong words are motivated by love and not by the attempt to intimidate them. Also, in talking about his joy and confidence, Paul is thinking about the next thing he is going to say to them, when, finally, Paul tells us the content of Titus’s report (vss. 5-16; we’ve been anticipating this since chapter two).

First, we have to pick up the thread of Paul’s travel narrative. Recall that he had gone from Ephesus to Troas (on the coast of Asia Minor) to preach the gospel (2:12). Apparently Paul expected Titus to meet him there, but Titus had not arrived. His heart distracted by the situation in Corinth, Paul left behind the open door of Troas and crossed over to Macedonia (2:13). Now we learn (7:5) that being in Macedonia did not bring Paul relief, for he still did not find Titus. Still not knowing what was happening in Corinth, waiting anxiously for Titus to arrive, Paul experienced “disputes without and fears within.” The “disputes” or “conflicts” (NIV) could refer to persecution in the Macedonian churches (Paul had to leave them earlier because of this; Acts 16–17; Phil. 1:28-30), but the “fears within” clearly refer to Paul’s ongoing concern for the situation in Corinth.

In words that sound a lot like 1:3-7, we hear Paul describe how he was “afflicted in every way,” but then God brought him “consolation” through the eventual arrival of Titus (7:5-7). Titus had a good report about how the Corinthians had responded to the “tearful letter.” Ironically, the good report is about how “sorry” the church is, how they are “longing” and “mourning” (vss. 7-8). This is why Paul “rejoiced still more” (vs. 7)! Strange as that might sound on first hearing, their sorrow is good news because repentance was what was most needed. There needed to be some godly sorrow concerning the disorder in the church, the rebellion of some, the sin which was being tolerated and even celebrated by some.

Paul explains that the real reason he is rejoicing is not because the Corinthians had been grieved by his letter, but because the grief had led to repentance (vs. 9). Grief can be good, if it is godly grief. Paul himself had shared in the grief. [If our hearts were like Paul’s heart, would we have more or less godly sorrow than we do?] At some point, perhaps at several, Paul had regretted sending the letter. No doubt he had wondered whether he had made matters worse instead of better. And when he finally heard that the “tearful letter” had caused them sorrow, he felt sorrow for having caused sorrow to people he loved. Yet that was outweighed and outlasted by the joy he felt over the change for the better, the repentance and fresh zeal for doing the right thing which the church was now showing. Now he knows, to his relief, that he has not harmed them (vs. 9) by his stern words of rebuke.

Paul is not a psychologist, but he shows divine wisdom in differentiating between “worldly grief” and “godly grief” (literally “grief according to God,” in the sense of “according to God’s will,” (vss. 9-10). Grief is a universal human experience, as we all from time to time suffer
genuine losses and disappointments. We know, from a psychological standpoint, that to fail or refuse to grieve over real losses is unhealthy for us. We also know that it is not healthy to be in grief perpetually. In fact, unrelenting grief will destroy us, bit by bit. But unrelenting grief is not “godly grief,” for the result of “godly grief” is not death but “repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret” (vs. 10). Good (godly) grief is for the right reasons, for the right seasons (right time), and for the right results. Good grief, godly sorrow, leads toward healing, cleansing, restoring, growing, and receiving more of God’s grace and strength.

Godly grief is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Just as we saw earlier that dying is part of the process of Christian transformation but life is the purpose, so now we can say about godly grief or godly sorrow: Grieving—over sin, over loss, or over a need that we or others have—is sometimes a necessary part of the process, but it is not the purpose, the goal, or the ultimate result. God’s purpose is life, salvation, the fulfillment of his good will for us. That his good purposes of life and joy are achieved only through dealing with the realities of sorrow and death is seen most clearly by looking at the cross and resurrection of Jesus. The process has to be repeated in us, according to the individual experiences we each have of going through life’s sorrows and receiving God’s comfort. This applies to the grief caused by losses (such as the death of a loved one) but also the grief which should rightly be caused by our sins and the needs of the world around us (cf. Matt. 5:4). There is a sense in which any sorrow can become a godly sorrow if it causes us to turn to God.

To deal with sin, there needs to be an appropriate sorrow, at least to the extent that we turn from it and toward the Lord. When we come to a fresh awareness of the harm we have done by our sins, we come to a new level of grief. Again, that is not a place to stop and dwell, but it is not a place to avoid either. If the Holy Spirit is leading us, he will convict us of sin when it is needed. To involve us in his intercession for others, the Holy Spirit may lead us (for a season) through a time of grieving and deep longing for God’s will to be done (Rom. 8:19, 22-23, 26-27). But the Holy Spirit leads us not only to see our sins and shortcomings and grieve over them; he leads us to leave our sins and continue on into the fullness of joy which Jesus wants to give (see John 15:11; 16:8-13; Gal. 5:22-23). Godly sorrow is, from time to time, a part of the road we must travel, but it is not the destination, nor is it a dead end street. Worldly sorrow, on the other hand, has no real hope for moral transformation and the resurrection of the body. Consequently, worldly sorrow and regret leads to death, the end of the road for all sorrow if we do not turn to God.

Titus has delivered good news to Paul about the good grief in Corinth. Paul rejoices over the good results, which he points out to them (vs. 11). Look, he says, at the “earnestness,” the “eagerness to clear yourselves.” Titus has reported their “indignation,” not directed toward Paul but toward the offending behavior which brought Paul’s rebuke (and indignation perhaps toward the person offending, since Paul had earlier encouraged them to ease up on that person who has now repented, 2:5-11). Paul congratulates them on having now shown the appropriate “zeal” for “punishment” (“readiness to see justice done,” NIV). The church (at least the majority, which has now acted) is “at every point . . . guiltless in the matter.” Thus Paul can now say that his whole purpose in writing the “tearful letter” had not been to pounce on “the one who did wrong,” nor was it to vindicate “the one who was wronged” (“injured,” NIV; probably Paul himself, since he was the focus of the rebellion, see 2:5). The true purpose of the “tearful letter” had been
precisely the result which had been achieved--“in order that your zeal for us might be made known to you [to the Corinthians themselves] before God.” The church at Corinth has learned something about themselves in this painful process; they have matured in a significant way, and Paul is comforted and encouraged by this (vs. 13).

So Paul is encouraged, and so is Titus because he can report that the church in Corinth is just as great as Paul had been saying it was (vss. 13-14)! They had received Titus, Paul’s representative, with all the proper respect due to an apostle’s delegate. “Fear and trembling” does not mean servile groveling but deference to the spiritual authority and responsibility borne by Paul and Titus. Paul ends this chapter, which has spoken so much about grief, on a happy note. Paul’s confidence in them has been vindicated (vs. 16). He knew he could count on them. And that provides a good transition to another topic on which Paul is counting on them, a topic on which he has been boasting to others about the Corinthians--their promised contribution to the collection for the church in Jerusalem. That topic will occupy chapters 8-9 and our next lesson.

Questions from LessonMaker by NavPress

2 Corinthians 6:3-10 - Paul's Hardships
OPEN IT
1. What images does the word "hardships" bring to mind?

EXPLORE IT
2. What is the connection between the credibility of Christianity and the people who call themselves Christians? (6:3)

3. What does this passage say about the cost of being Christ's disciple? (6:4-10)

4. What price did Paul pay for following Christ? (6:4-10)

5. What kind of weapons did Paul use? (6:7)

6. How did the accusations against Paul differ from the reality Paul experienced as an ambassador for Christ? (6:9-10)

7. In what way was Paul poor yet rich? (6:10)

GET IT
8. How do you think Paul was able to keep an attitude of sincere love for people when so many opposed him?

9. What can we learn from Paul's relationship with the Corinthians that can help us deal with friends who frustrate us?

10. How can you guard against causing other Christians to stumble in their faith?
11. How does God use hardships to strengthen our relationship with Him?

12. How do Paul's words put a new perspective on wealth and poverty?

APPLY IT

13. What can you do this week to help another Christian persevere through hard times?

**2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 - Do Not Be Yoked with Unbelievers**

OPEN IT

1. How do you choose your friends?

EXPLORE IT

2. Who were the "unbelievers" Paul described? (6:14)

3. Why is it wrong and dangerous for Christians to be bound together with unbelievers? (6:14-16)

4. Why is it important for Christians to be separate from non-Christian influences? (6:16-18)

5. On what condition does the Lord receive people? (6:17)

6. From what did the Corinthians need to purify themselves? (7:1)

7. Why should we strive to perfect holiness in our lives? (7:1)

GET IT

8. Why do you think this passage is so often applied to marriage?

9. In what other areas of life besides marriage do Christians need to be separate from non-Christians?

10. How should Christians balance their involvement with non-Christians?

11. How can you keep your relationships with non-Christians without tightly binding yourself to them?

APPLY IT

12. In what relationships do you need to maintain your freedom to follow Christian convictions?
2 Corinthians 7:2-16 [Good Grief]

OPEN IT
1. What is it like to have a loyal and faithful friend?
2. When was a time you had to confront a friend?

EXPLORE IT
3. What was Paul's experience in Macedonia? (7:5)
4. How did God comfort Paul? (7:6-7)
5. What was the cause of the sorrow felt by the Corinthians? (7:8)
6. Why did Paul change his feelings about sending his "tearful letter"? (7:8-9)
7. What qualities were produced by the Corinthians' godly sorrow? (7:11)

GET IT
8. What can we learn from the relationship between Paul and Titus?
9. When have you ever been confronted by a friend regarding a spiritual matter?
10. How should we respond when someone points out a wrong in our lives?
11. What can we learn from this passage about dealing with Christians who have fallen away from the faith?

APPLY IT
12. What do you need to do this week to turn sorrow for sin into godly living?
13. What specific step can you take this week to build up another believer who is discouraged?
In this lesson we see Paul encouraging the Corinthian Christians in a project he had been working on for some time: an offering for the Jewish church in Jerusalem from the Gentile churches he had established. This offering would relieve material needs but would also signify the unity of the Gentile churches with the Jerusalem church. Paul had written about this in 1 Cor. 16:1-4, so this was not a new topic. But now Paul is on his way to Corinth, and it’s time to receive the Corinthians’ contribution and combine it with those of the other churches. So, he writes them again to prompt their readiness. To help encourage them, Paul points to the example of the generous Macedonians, who are the natural (friendly) rivals of those who live in the area around Corinth (the region known as “Achaia”).

It would be speculation, but hard to resist, to imagine how much this Jerusalem collection had figured in the conflicts between Paul and certain elements in the church at Corinth. There is no clear indication, at least in chapters 8-9, that the church resented this project or resisted it. On the other hand, if they were ready “since last year” (9:2), why isn’t Paul more relaxed about their being ready when he arrives soon? It could be that the offering has been put on hold during the turmoil surrounding the “painful visit” and the “tearful letter,” not delayed by Paul’s visit or by his letter but by the moral and disciplinary problems which had prompted the visit and letter.

Possibly the rival leaders within the church had made this collection a point of complaint against Paul, just as they had criticized his changing travel plans (1:15-18) and even his unimpressive personal appearance and speech (10:10). If Paul’s critics were malicious enough to heap scorn on him for such trivial things, they could hardly be expected not to exploit the issue of money in their efforts to plant seeds of distrust in the church. Now that the church has responded to Paul’s “tearful letter” and the ministry of Titus, Paul can confidently bring representatives from other churches with him, receive the Corinthians’ contribution, and then be sent on his way to Jerusalem.

Grace and Giving

Probably the key verse to this entire section is 2 Cor. 8:9, which reads as follows in the NIV: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (Note the similarity to 2 Cor. 5:21.) And the key word of this verse is “grace,” which translates the Greek word charis (pronounced like the first part of “charismatic”). Grace is such a familiar word in the Christian vocabulary that we might easily overlook its significance in this sentence, especially if we are unaware of the several uses and translations of charis in this segment of Scripture.

In fact, Paul uses charis more often in 2 Cor. 8 than in any other chapter in all his epistles. That in itself is interesting—that Paul would refer to “grace” so often in discussing an offering of money rather than in talking about salvation. He uses charis seven times in chapter 8 (vss. 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 16, 19) and another three times in chapter 9 (vss. 8, 14, 15). You won’t be able to tell that by reading the English text, however, since charis is not always best translated as “grace.” Sometimes, to communicate its significance in a particular context, charis has to be translated as
“thanks,” as it is in 2 Cor. 9:15: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” Does that strike you as interesting—that charis could be translated as “thanks” or as “grace,” for which we give thanks? It really is like the way we refer to “saying grace” over a meal, by which we mean saying “thanks,” as well as asking God to bless that for which we are thankful, since he has given it to us by his “grace.” “Saying grace” is a grateful response to grace. In 2 Corinthians 8-9 charis frequently has this same two-sided meaning: it can refer to God’s grace or it can refer to the way we respond to God’s grace by expressing grace in giving. This could be any giving motivated by wanting to respond to God’s grace by similar acts of generosity, but especially giving to causes which promote the spread of the gospel and to causes which give testimony to the gospel.

For the sense of what “grace” means in 2 Cor. 8:9, compare the wording in the NRSV: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Thus charis in this text is not just the motive behind Jesus’ giving but the act of giving itself. Charis has this meaning also in other verses in 2 Corinthians 8, as you can see from the following comparison of translations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NRSV</th>
<th>NIV</th>
<th>NKJV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>charis in vs. 6 “generous undertaking”</td>
<td>“act of grace”</td>
<td>“grace”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>charis in vs. 7 “generous undertaking”</td>
<td>“grace of giving”</td>
<td>“grace”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>charis in vs.19 “generous undertaking”</td>
<td>“offering”</td>
<td>“gift”</td>
</tr>
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You can see that the NRSV is being quite consistent, then, when it translates charis as “generous act” in the key verse, 8:9. My point in all of this is to emphasize the vital connection between grace and generosity—“grace” (with all its connotations for understanding our salvation and relationship with God) and “generosity” in giving of our resources, whether money or time and energy. To put it another way, recipients of God’s generous grace become generous, gracious givers. If “giving is God’s way of living,” as someone once said, then it becomes our way of living, too. As we go through the two chapters, we’ll see the grace-connection between our receiving and our giving. We don’t “earn points” with God when we give; we express “grace.” The converse is true too: when we refuse to give, we stifle the expression of grace in and through our lives.

**Good Examples of Giving and the Best Example (8:1-9)**

Paul’s manner of bringing up the topic of the Jerusalem collection is interesting. He does not start by saying, “Now about that offering you promised to get together . . . .” Rather he begins by giving the Corinthians a testimony about “the grace [charis] of God” in the Macedonian churches (8:1; this would include Philippi and Thessalonica). Paul writes this while in Macedonia making preparations to head south toward the region of Achaia.

Achaia, the region containing both Corinth and Athens, considered itself more sophisticated than Macedonia. Both were regions of “greater Greece,” but Athens and its close neighbors were certainly more the center of Greek culture, which had spread over all the eastern Mediterranean world and as far west as Rome. Even though Alexander the Great was a Macedonian, the civilization, language, and ideas he had spread in the fourth century B.C. were essentially those of Achaia. Achaians regarded Macedonians as relative “rubes,” or perhaps the equivalent of
what we would call “hillbillies.” The Macedonians, of course, did not take kindly to this condescension, since they had plenty of reason to be proud of their heritage—after all, Alexander was their native son. Macedonia, however, was not as prosperous as Corinth and Athens in the time of Paul.

The rivalry was a “family affair,” since they were all Greeks, with really the same language and culture, with slight regional differences. The rivalry is similar, perhaps, to Texas-Oklahoma or Georgia-Alabama. So, when Paul holds up the Macedonians as great examples of generosity in this Jerusalem offering, he can count on a spirited yet good-natured response from the Corinthians. They would not want to be outdone in doing good by the Macedonians!

In commending the Macedonians, Paul mentions their “severe ordeal of affliction” (vs. 2), referring to the persecution they had suffered since the founding of the church (Acts 16-17; Phil. 1:28-30; 1 Thess. 1:6). The churches in Macedonia were (compared to those in Achaia) relatively poor, yet they were rich in joy and generosity. The Philippians especially had been generous to Paul’s missionary efforts after he left their city (Phil. 4:15-19). With regard to the Jerusalem collection, the Macedonian believers were inspiring examples of giving “according to their means, and even beyond their means” (vs. 3). Such was their experience of “grace” (vs. 1) that they, too, wanted to offer a sacrifice through their giving. Paul says that they begged for the “privilege” (charis/grace) of participating in the offering (vs. 4). A real experience of receiving grace had made them eager to express giving grace.

The Macedonians had their priorities right: “they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us” (vs. 5). Probably that means they had prayed about it and, then, as the Lord had directed their hearts, they gave to the cause Paul was promoting. The Macedonians’ actions have prompted Paul to send Titus to Achaia (again) in order to complete the process of getting ready the offering (charis—“this generous undertaking,” “this act of grace”) on which they had earlier made a start (vs. 6).

Having bragged on the Macedonians, Paul now brags on the Corinthians, who “excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge” (vs. 7; cf. 1 Cor. 1:4-7). Paul wants them to “excel also in this generous undertaking” (charis; “this grace of giving,” NIV). He does not want to “command” them to give, but he is providing them an opportunity to show “the genuineness” of the love they profess by this gentle comparison with the Macedonians (vs. 8).

Is it right for Christians to compete with one another? Idealistically we might say that we are not in competition with one another, and ultimately, of course, that is true. We are not competing for a limited number of places in heaven! But competing, even if it is only against ourselves—to set new records of achievement—seems to be a natural part of being human. And from the perspective of the good that can come from it, competition can be very beneficial.

Surely we are better off as consumers because manufacturers and suppliers have to compete with one another to provide better and less expensive goods. In the moral realm, however, “competition” is different. You don’t try to defeat the other person; rather you allow the other person’s zeal and creativity in serving to push you to do better than you have. Even if you never surpass the “rival,” you will surpass the best you would have done without the rival’s inspiration.
And the “rival,” if likewise well motivated, will do a better job of serving because of your efforts. What a contest it would be if we competed to see who could best express the grace of God by giving! No one would be a loser!

If the Macedonians can inspire the Corinthians, and the Corinthians can inspire the Macedonians, the one who should inspire us all is the best example of grace, specifically the grace of giving: Jesus Christ. After the good-natured comparisons between the natural human rivals, this mention of Jesus takes the challenge of generosity to a totally new level. To say that he is the greatest example of giving still seems like an understatement, for no one had more to offer, and no one ever gave more. (Compare Phil. 2:6-8; 4:19; Eph. 1:3.) Truly Jesus was a giver beyond comparison who nevertheless inspires our giving.

How was Jesus rich? If we think just in terms of his earthly life, we would have to say he was never rich in financial terms (Matt. 8:21). Paul is thinking rather of the riches of who Jesus is as the eternal Son of God, who shared the Father’s indescribable glory but who willingly took on the humble state of humanity, lived humbly as a man, and--most humbly of all--gave his life as sacrifice for our sins (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus was rich in terms of life and glory, but he gave them up to enrich us with his life and glory.

What goes unsaid here, of course, is that by giving up his life and glory in order to gain our salvation, Jesus ultimately lost nothing. Rather he gained new life not just for himself but also for us. His eternal glory is not diminished but enhanced by spreading it into our lives. Thus we see an important truth about giving in the Kingdom of God: what you give is what you get to continue to enjoy. This is so different from the worldly point of view that many Christians still do not believe it, or so their actions would indicate! To that extent, we still need to learn the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we need to learn that he knows more about how to make things last than we do. That’s why he’s not anxious and selfish; that’s why he’s generous and gives. That’s why those who know him best are generous in similar ways. That’s why those who want to get to know him better try to imitate him in giving, so that they have something in common with their generous Lord.

**Intentions and Resources (8:10-15)**

We see again in vs. 10 how careful Paul is being to avoid any coercion of those he invites to contribute to the Jerusalem fund. He gives his “advice” or “opinion” about how the church should proceed in gathering the collection. The advice is that now would be a good time to finish what they had already started “last year.” He mentions favorably their “eagerness” (vs. 11), an attitude which now needs to become manifest in deeds, “according to your means.” He emphasizes this qualification by repeating the concept in vs. 12--the “eagerness . . . is acceptable according to what one has--not according to what one does not have.”

This is a point of some importance, in two ways. First, the eagerness or willingness needs to be in the heart of the giver. By definition, this kind of eagerness cannot be coerced. Second, the acceptability of the willingness (in the eyes of God) must be matched with deeds, according to the opportunity and the resources available. God does not expect everyone to give the same amount, for not everyone is given the same resources with which to be generous. It would be
self-deceptive, however, to claim to be willing to give while ignoring genuine opportunities and hoarding one’s resources. And of course God is not deceived by our self-deception.

While God does not expect everyone to give the same amount, he does want everyone to express the grace of giving. Thus Jesus was more impressed by a small gift from a poor widow than by the large gifts of those whose motives were not as pure (see Luke 21:1-4). Her giving was motivated by gratitude for God’s grace and by her dependence on God’s grace. Those who do not know their dependence on grace find it more difficult to be grateful for it. They may give for a variety of reasons, and others will be helped by it, but such givers will not be as blessed by the act of giving as they would if more motivated by grace. The amount given is not the issue—both rich and poor can give generously and be generously blessed if motivated by the generosity of God’s grace toward them.

This is really what Paul means by “equality” (NIV) or “fair balance” (NRSV, vss. 13-14). The Corinthians are not being encouraged to give to the saints in Jerusalem so that everyone will end up with the same amount. Rather, it is a matter of one party having a need and the other party having a resource to help meet the need. Paul is not trying to make life harder for the Corinthians in order to make life easier on the Christians in Jerusalem (vs. 13). Rather, he is encouraging them to use their resources, “your present abundance,” to meet the need of others. By helping the Jerusalem saints to be (relatively) more prosperous, the Corinthians can expect to have their need supplied by the very abundance they helped bring about (vs. 14).

Does Paul mean that the Corinthians should expect the church at Jerusalem to send them some money some day? Perhaps such an occasion would arise, but that is not really the point here. If the Corinthians respond generously to Jerusalem’s need, the Corinthians are already enriched by the response itself. They have become more like Jesus (vs. 9); they may have less “in the bank” but they are richer than before. The need of the Jerusalem church has enriched the Corinthian church by eliciting this gift from them. The fresh “abundance” in Jerusalem thus helps meet the “need” in Corinth, where the people need to give. (Paul does not mention here something he says in Romans 15:27, which he wrote from Corinth just after this—that the Gentile churches had already been enriched spiritually by the Jerusalem church and should, in turn, help them in material ways.)

It may not be financial assistance, but everybody needs to receive assistance from others at times. On the other hand, everyone needs to become a giver, a helper—even when our financial resources are meager. We all need to become like Jesus and like our heavenly Father (who is generous to all, Matt. 5:44-48). We cannot become like Jesus and like our Father without becoming generous, motivated by grace and expressing grace. We need to respond to the needs of others. God so arranges things in his kingdom that everyone gets a chance to become generous (Matt. 6:12), and indeed he makes it a requirement (Matt. 6:14-15).

Paul illustrates his point about our God-given resources by a quotation from Exodus 16:18 in verse 15. The reference is to the supply of manna, which was from God and was always enough. If God has given us enough to meet our needs (and he has), then he has also given us opportunities to become like him in giving. He does so by bringing us opportunities to help others in genuine need. The needy are part of our provision for becoming generous like God.
If we hoard the material supply God gives us, however, and refuse to help meet the material needs of others, we miss our opportunity to grow in the grace of giving.

God, the ultimate Source of everything, has given enough for all needs to be met, but only if we share. The problems of poverty in our society and in the world as a whole are not caused so much by scarcity of supply as by unwillingness to share (including unwillingness to share in the supply of available work—2 Thess. 3:10-12). The supply is adequate, but the distribution system is in need of adjustment. The key element needed in the adjustment is for the recipients of the supply (us) to become gracious in sharing what the Source of supply (God) has given us. Distribution of the supply depends on giving by those with an abundance (v. 14), and a willingness to give of what they have even when they don’t have an abundance of money.

A Trustworthy Delegation (8:16-24)

In the remainder of chapter 8, Paul commends the persons he is sending ahead of him to Corinth. Their purpose is to represent the other churches who are participating in the Jerusalem offering. The value of this, in part, is to reassure the Corinthians about the integrity with which the collection will be handled. Trusted men, with proven character, are being put in charge of the money’s safe delivery in Jerusalem. The apostle thus removes himself from the center of control and possible suspicion by his critics. Understand that the men Paul mentions here would be present in the Corinthian fellowship at the time the epistle was being read aloud to the church; thus Paul does not name them, except for Titus, who has already figured prominently in Paul’s ongoing dealings with the church.

Titus, who had delivered the “tearful letter” and then reported back to Paul on the ultimately good response, was now being sent with 2 Corinthians (vs. 16), along with the other men referred to here. Besides delivering the epistle, Titus is responsible for completing the offering and having it ready before Paul’s arrival (8:6). Titus has proved, by his previous success in ministering to the Corinthian church, that he is trusted by them and by Paul. This makes him an ideal choice to head this delegation.

Along with Titus comes “the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming the good news” (vs. 18). This unnamed “brother” (who would be present as this was being read in Corinth) is thought by some scholars to be Luke. There is no way to prove this, but it does seem appropriate in light of Luke’s association with Paul in his missionary travels and work, and in light of Luke’s knowledge of the life and ministry of Jesus. (Luke probably had not written his gospel by this time, but he would already have had a considerable knowledge base.) Whether it is Luke or someone else, he has been chosen for this task precisely because of his good reputation among the churches.

As mentioned earlier, vs. 19 is another place where charis is translated as “generous undertaking” by the NRSV and as “offering” by the NIV. The act of giving is being referred to, but in such a way that the motive is highlighted. The giving of Christians should be motivated by the grace of God in them. The involvement of God’s grace in this process is just one more reason why those who will take the offering to Jerusalem need to act with obvious integrity. Thus (in vss. 20-21), Paul openly states that he wants “no one . . . to blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, for we intend to what is right not only in the Lord’s sight
but also in the sight of others.” Notice that the apostle regards the opinions or perceptions of others as important, perhaps not ultimately as important as God’s (remember 5:10) but certainly important for the spiritual health of the church as they seek to use their God-given resources to do good. People need to be reasonably sure that their grace-motivated giving is going to be used in ways that honor God and honor the intentions of the givers to honor God. What people think cannot be recklessly ignored without endangering the effectiveness of the ministry (see 4:2; 6:3).

Paul’s handling of the offering, which he is entrusting to other men who are trusted by the churches, is exemplary, not just in terms of prudence but also because he shows respect for the motive of Christian giving. It is shameful whenever anyone exploits or defrauds another person, but all the more so whenever someone exploits a person’s generosity motivated by an experience of God’s grace. When someone exploits that motive, he exploits not only the generosity of the person giving but also the grace of God who motivated the giver. Paul knows that the right handling of this money is important to people and to God! It is a spiritual matter how we handle resources put into our hands because of grace. If we never answer to humans, we will certainly answer to God (remember 5:10 again!).

Paul mentions still another unnamed “brother” (who would be present as the epistle was being read). He, too, is a man of proven character, “tested and found eager in many matters” (vs. 22). This brings the total to three in the delegation—Titus, a “brother” who is possibly Luke, and a third “brother.” Possibly the group was larger and these were the leaders. Paul commends them all as “messengers of the churches” (vs. 23, notice the plural). Besides the obvious value of having representatives of other churches give assurance of how the money would be handled, Paul diplomatically points out that what these men see in the church in Corinth will be what other churches will soon know about them. That’s why he exhorts them: “Show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you” (vs. 24).

**Timely Preparation to Give (9:1-5)**

Still being careful to express himself diplomatically, Paul says that he doesn’t really need to write these instructions to Corinth, since he knows full well that they have “been ready since last year” (9:2). In fact, he’s been bragging about their readiness to the Macedonians (at this point the Corinthians would have to be smiling). Just as Paul has used the good example of the Macedonians to encourage the Corinthian response, he has already used the Corinthians to stir up the zeal of the Macedonians.

Perhaps the Corinthians don’t really need Paul’s prodding, but just to be on the safe side—to spare Paul and the Corinthians possible embarrassment—he has sent Titus and the other two brothers ahead of him. When Paul arrives, he will be accompanied by others from Macedonia, and what a humiliating thing it would be to find the Corinthians unprepared (vss. 3-4)! With the actual collection being completed before Paul’s arrival, the Corinthians will be spared that possible shame, and the contribution itself would be free of the taint of looking like the Corinthians were giving only because a large group of Macedonians were present. Paul wants the Corinthians’ contribution to be a “voluntary gift” (vs. 5; NIV says “generous gift”), not “an extortion” (NIV has “one grudgingly given”).
This is one reason why we encourage Adult Class officers to try to avoid letting class members make spontaneous appeals for money for even worthy causes without giving the officers a chance to review the merits and needs of the case. When people are “put on the spot” by being asked in front of others to contribute to something they aren’t sure about, it can be a form of “extortion,” however unintended. Those who give may resent it; those who don’t give may resent being made to feel stingy or uncaring. Paul does not want the Corinthians to resent their giving but rather to rejoice in it. This can best be assured by their timely planning to give, and Paul is doing his part by giving them time to plan and give in an orderly manner.

The Blessings of Giving (9:6-15)
Having used the example of the Macedonians to prod the Corinthians, having admitted that he used the example of the Corinthians to prod the Macedonians, and having pointed to Jesus as the greatest example of gracious giving (charis; 8:9), Paul will conclude his exhortation to give generously by reflecting on the principle of sowing and reaping, and by reminding us how our giving blesses others and multiplies the praise of God.

In the physical realm, the principle of sowing and reaping (vs. 6) is self-evident. If you want a larger crop you have to sow more seed. The return will be proportional to the investment. We all know this, even though we are sometimes or in some respects hindered by fear or other factors from living by this knowledge.

In this regard, it might be helpful to note the exact expression Paul uses for sowing and reaping “bountifully” (NIV: “generously”). The Greek expression is ep’ eulogiais, for which the literal translation is “upon blessings” or “with blessings,” but the meaning of that is unclear in English. The phrase is well translated by the English versions cited, but it could also be paraphrased this way: “the one who sows because of blessing and with the intention of being a blessing will also reap as a blessing.” In other words, the person who is able to give “generously” or “bountifully” (in the sense of this verse) is not the person who can give huge sums but the person who believes in blessing—believing that God has blessed and will bless, that God wants his people to bless others and be blessed in doing so. Such a person is free to give generously because the confidence in God’s will to bless sets us free from the fear and anxiety which otherwise rule our lives. This interpretation of sowing and reaping bountifully is borne out by the remaining verses of chapter nine.

Giving because you believe in blessing means you give because you want to give, because it’s in your heart to give, which is completely the opposite of giving “reluctantly or under compulsion” (vs. 7). God himself is delighted when we give for the same reasons as he gives, because he wants to give. That’s why “God loves a cheerful giver.” God is a cheerful giver (see James 1:5, 17), and he wants you to feel good about your giving, not pained or compelled. If our giving causes us grief, or if we resent having to do it, we are not giving as God gives. Not surprisingly, those who give the least enjoy it the least; those who give generously (with blessing as their motive) enjoy it the most. When we observe that the Greek word translated “cheerful” (vs. 7) is the word from which we get “hilarious,” we get the picture: giving is meant to be enjoyable. If we really believe that God is delighted to give to us, we will be delighted to give to others.
If we believe that God wants to bless us and wants to let us be his partners in blessing others, there should be no problem at all in believing that God is able to do just that. Thus Paul writes these words of promise in vs. 8: “And God is able to provide you with every blessing [charis/grace] in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” It’s interesting to note again the usage of charis, which NRSV translates (appropriately in this context) as “blessing.” It’s good to remember that any “return” we receive because of our giving to others is still God’s grace, what he chooses to do freely, not something we have coerced him to do. God is so good and so generous that we don’t need to manipulate him into giving us anything (as though we could!). God is more generous than we even believe him to be. His desire to give is greater than our desire to receive from him. Christian experience repeatedly proves that when our willingness to give is increased, we find God to be more generous than we have ever before known him to be. Our giving does not and cannot force God to give to us; our giving opens our hands to receive what God wants to give us.

Another interesting thing to note about this verse is the emphasis on the comprehensiveness of God’s ability to bless. Notice the words: every, always, everything, every (in NRSV); all, all, all, all, every (NIV)! This should not be limited to financial or material provision, for God’s provision is needed for spiritual needs as well. God’s comprehensive ability to bless should also be seen in light of his purpose to let us be fellow workers with him in blessing others: “so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (vs. 8, NIV). The abundance we receive is not just an end in itself; it is a means to another end as well—doing good for others.

To underline the point about the generous use of our resources, Paul (in vs. 9) quotes Psalm 112:9 about the one who “gives to the poor”: “his righteousness endures forever.” In this context, righteousness means “an act of righteousness or piety” (see the Psalm context; also Matt. 6:1, where righteousness (or piety) is used in this same sense). The righteous act of giving to the poor has lasting results, not in the sense of solving the need for all time but in the sense of being an act which leaves an indelible mark on the character of the one who gives because of grace (and on the one who receives if he does so with gratitude for the grace shown). Righteously motivated giving makes a permanent difference in the person so motivated.

Coming back to the principle of sowing and reaping, Paul reminds us that what we use to “sow” (whether literal seed or money) has come to us from God (vs. 10). God uses what he has already put into our hands to bless us with more—if we use it wisely. Someone with a handful of seed could choose to eat it, or by sowing it he could choose to let God multiply it. That’s where bread comes from, ultimately from God who gave the seed, but God also gives bread by giving seed and the wisdom to sow some of it instead of eating it all! “Sowing” with our finances is what we do when we invest in what we hope will be a profitable business; “sowing” with our finances is also what we do when we give to God’s work, which is always to spread the blessings. Then the promise is made to us: God “will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness” (vs. 10; see also Phil. 4:19). God will bless the seed you sow and, by doing so, increase the amount of seed available for still more sowing, for more giving to others, for more sharing of the grace that has come to you. (This is a different mentality from that of the selfish person—who does not believe in blessing—whose increase in resources is
usually turned into an increase of consumption rather than an increase in contributions to benefit others.) “Righteousness” in verse 10 has the same sense it does in verse nine.

Paul begins to draw this chapter to a close with further assurances that God is going to bless the Corinthians for being a blessing with the blessings he has already given them, which will enable them to be even more of a blessing in the future. “You will be enriched” (vs. 11) applies to the meeting of their future needs and being enabled to expand their giving to others. But the enrichment should not be limited to just financial, material blessings. What a blessing, what an enrichment, to know that your generosity has caused people to give “thanksgiving to God”! Indeed, Paul says, not only are the Corinthians helping to meet “the needs of the saints” (the immediate object of the collection); they are prompting people to “glorify God” as they see the reality of Christian profession lived out in Christian giving (vss. 12-13). Generous Christians are more than talk; generous Christians are genuine. And genuine, generous Christians encourage the hearts of others.

Paul also assures the Corinthians that the believers in Jerusalem will deeply appreciate the offering to meet their needs. They will pray for the Gentile believers who have so blessed them “because of the surpassing grace [charis] of God” demonstrated by their gift (vs. 14). The Jerusalem church will be as generous in their thanks and in their prayers as the Corinthians have been with their material resources. That would be a good reason to give to help them, but Paul concludes this chapter (vs. 15) with another reminder of the most important reason to give: “Thanks [charis] be to God for his indescribable gift!” Our gifts can never compare with God’s gift, but our giving can be a response to his and a reflection of his generosity (see 8:9; John 3:16).

Questions from LessonMaker by NavPress

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 - Generosity Encouraged

OPEN IT
1. How do you feel when your pastor preaches about tithing?

EXPLORE IT
2. What attitude did the Macedonians have in their giving? (8:3-4)

3. What three things did the Macedonian Christians do that impressed Paul? (8:3-5)

4. What was it that Titus had begun to do? (8:6)

5. Why did Paul avoid commanding the Corinthians to give? (8:8)

6. Why did Paul use the actions of the Macedonian Christians to motivate the Corinthians to give? (8:11)

7. What is it about a gift to the Lord that makes it acceptable? (8:12)
GET IT
8. How can joy lead to generosity, even when a person lives in poverty?

9. How does Christ's example motivate you to give?

10. What prevents people from giving a fair portion of their money to the Lord for His work?

APPLY IT
11. What step can you take this week to review and improve your financial support of the Lord's work?

2 Corinthians 8:16--9:5 - Titus Sent to Corinth
EXPLORE IT
1. Why did Paul send two other Christians along with Titus to Corinth? (8:18-23; 9:3-5)

2. How did Paul motivate the Macedonians to join in the collection for the Christians of Jerusalem? (9:2-3)

3. Why did Paul send Titus to collect the gift from the Corinthian church? (9:3-5)

GET IT
4. What motivates you to give to your church or Christian ministries?

5. In what ways should we try to avoid criticism with the way we carry out our Christian responsibilities?

6. What can you do to guard against a grudging attitude when you offer your resources to the Lord?

APPLY IT
7. In what ways besides giving money can you be generous to others in the name of Christ this week?

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 - Sowing Generously
OPEN IT
1. Who is the most generous person you know? Why do you think so?

EXPLORE IT
2. What promise does God give to believers who do give generously? (9:8)

3. What does God provide? (9:10)

4. What results from the generosity of Christians? (9:11)
5. What was the most important benefit that would arise from the collection for the Jerusalem church? (9:12-14)

6. For what kind of gift did Paul praise God in his letter? (9:15)

GET IT
7. Why does God love a cheerful giver over someone who grudgingly gives large sums of money?

8. What does this passage tell us about the relationship between Christian faith and giving?

9. What could a reluctant giver do to become a more cheerful giver?

10. What principles of accountability should govern Christian giving?

APPLY IT
11. What is one way you can set an example of giving?
In the last two lessons of this series, we will look at the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians. Here Paul returns to a defense of his integrity and motives against unnamed critics and rivals in Corinth. The presence of rivalries and competing groups within the church was addressed in 1 Corinthians and no doubt was a central focus of Paul’s “painful visit” and “tearful letter,” which came between 1 and 2 Corinthians. Some of the rivalry and competition seems to have been particularly malicious and dangerous, a fact which appears more clearly in 2 Cor. 10-13 than anywhere previously. Even though the majority of the church has responded now to the “tearful letter” and Titus’ effective ministry representing Paul, there is still real danger within the church, prompting Paul to use the strongest language yet in referring to the leaders who continue to oppose his authority.

The language is so strong (especially in contrast to the cheerful tone of chs. 8-9) that some scholars have tried to identify chapters 10-13 with the “tearful letter,” hypothesizing that at least part of that earlier letter somehow became attached to chapters 1-9 at a later time. You may find some commentaries discussing this view or even advocating it. It is not an impertinent notion, but I don’t think it is persuasive. All of the Greek manuscript evidence supports the original unity of the epistle as we find it in our English Bibles. The abrupt change in tone from the end of chapter nine to the beginning of chapter ten is best explained by the change in subject and Paul’s diplomatically wise decision to leave his hardest words for the end of the epistle. After he had rejoiced over the obedience of the majority, he could deal with the stubborn minority more effectively. The strong warnings at the end would be better remembered when heard at the end—and (we need to remind ourselves) the church at Corinth would be hearing the letter read aloud at one sitting.

In these last four chapters, Paul will claim and exercise his authority as an apostle. He is reluctant to indulge in the kind of comparisons that his opponents are promoting, but ultimately Paul feels that he has no choice—not because his reputation is at stake but because the life and health of the church are at stake. On the surface it probably appeared to be just a contest for which preacher would wield the most influence. Paul’s detractors had accused him of timidity, unimpressive personal appearance, and lack of eloquence in speech (10:1, 10). Even Paul’s refusal to receive financial support from the Corinthians had been used against him (11:7-11). But since Paul’s authority was not meant to impress people, all these criticisms were ultimately pointless. Nonetheless they were somewhat effective in distracting the church and diverting their attention to self-centered, self-promoting interlopers, who cared more for their reputations than for the health of the church.

Because the criticisms have been somewhat effective, Paul must answer them—for the good of the church. Pushed to this necessity, Paul says he will use his God-given authority to build up the church (10:8), even though he may have to do some pulling down of strongholds in the process (10:4). This building up would be the measure of his apostolic ministry, not the tearing down, nor would it be foolish comparisons with others who made exaggerated claims for themselves and their spiritual experiences. Paul was unconcerned with preserving his reputation;
he was very concerned about the effects of deception and domination by “false apostles” (11:13) who wanted to discredit Paul for their own advantage.

Paul’s own discomfort with having to argue at this level is evident to any careful reader, particularly as he keeps warning us that he is about to boast like his critics and rivals do, but then he postpones it again and again as he protests the necessity of boasting. When he finally does “boast,” he surprises us by boasting about things which show his weakness rather than his personal strength. While Paul was obviously uncomfortable with having to put the spotlight on himself at all, we can be grateful that the circumstances prompted Paul to clarify the true nature and aim of genuine spiritual authority among Christians. While we know (from our vantage point) that Paul was a true spiritual giant, and that anyone in Corinth who thought otherwise must have been foolish indeed, we will more profitably read these chapters if we note how superficial assessments are often still made by Christians and why we are just as likely as the Corinthians to be impressed by something other than the genuine.

**Superficial Assessment versus Real Authority (10:1-11)**

After concluding his instructions and encouragement regarding the Jerusalem offering (chs. 8-9), Paul begins to draw this epistle to a close. He comes back to the painful issues of divisions and rivalries within the Corinthian church. Knowing that he will soon stand before these believers in person, Paul makes a strong appeal to their hearts and minds.

Paul puts his appeal in very personal terms (“I myself, Paul”) and invokes the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” (10:1). There is a certain irony in this choice of words. No one aware of the accounts of Jesus’ life would question that he was meek and gentle (Matt. 11:29), but often we are more impressed with arrogance and bravado. Some at Corinth obviously were, and they had disparagingly referred to Paul as “timid” (NIV puts this word in quotation marks, indicating that Paul was claiming a term that his critics had used against him; NRSV has “humble”). By invoking the meekness and gentleness of Christ, Paul takes what was meant to be criticism and shows how the intended insult is really a compliment. If some consider Paul weak, all the better, for that is how unspiritual people judged Jesus, too (see 11:30 and 12:9 for how Paul develops this strategy in his argument, with 13:4 perhaps the climax). Paul wants nothing more than to be like Jesus in the same way that Jesus was weak and strong (see Phil. 3:10).

When Paul wrote the “tearful letter,” which must have come across quite strongly, his critics conceded that Paul’s letters were “bold,” but this only served to heighten the contrast with his “unimpressive” personal appearance (vs. 10; NIV). His critics fastened onto Paul’s appearance to disparage him and undermine his influence. We, of course, would never do that with Paul! But no culture has ever been more prone to judge by appearances (“image”) than ours, and this is true in Christian circles as much as in secular ones. We evaluate preachers, teachers, and other leaders more by “style” (and entertainment value) than by “substance.” That was essentially the problem with many in Corinth: they were evaluating Paul “according to human standards” (vs. 2) and presuming that Paul and everyone else was using the same standard, too. (“According to human standards” is “the standards of this world” in the NIV, but literally “according to the flesh.” “Flesh” (Greek sarx) is used in several constructions in vss. 2-4. In this context, the NRSV uses “human” for sarx, in the sense of “merely human,” while the NIV uses “the world,” in the sense of human ways apart from God.)
Paul does not want a repeat of the “painful visit”; that’s why he begs (vs. 2) to be spared the necessity of showing boldness in dealing with those who think Paul is just like them—evaluating persons and things “according to human standards.” True, just like everyone else, Paul and all Christians “live as human beings” (in “the flesh,” vs. 3); however, says Paul, “we do not wage war according to human standards” (according to “the flesh”). It is really a warning to those who are so judging Paul when he writes that “the weapons of our warfare are not merely human” (vs. 4). Those who think that they are in a popularity contest with Paul do not understand the spiritual dimension; they are evaluating things on the surface, according to the way it appears to any human observer.

As he writes elsewhere (Eph. 6:12-18), Paul knows that the real contest in Corinth is not with other human beings (“flesh and blood”). Those who think that the real conflict is with other human beings are most apt to become casualties and unwitting tools of the real enemy—“spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). The “spiritual warfare” referred to in 2 Cor. 10 is specifically the battle for the minds and affections of people within the church. The challenge is for Christians to be delivered from the world’s way of thinking (according to the flesh). The fact that Corinthian believers were still evaluating spiritual leaders according to appearance and not according to truth and substance shows that they were, in important ways, still thinking and choosing on the same basis as their pagan neighbors (see 1 Cor. 3:3-4). Having the mindset of the world in any area of our lives makes it impossible to please God in that area (see Rom. 8:5-8).

How much do we evaluate persons and things according to the same standards as our neighbors use? How much danger does this pose for us? As much as it did for the Corinthian believers? Are there “strongholds” in our minds and hearts, in our attitudes and affections, which need to be pulled down? The Apostle says that Christians have at our disposal “weapons” which are capable of pulling down what needs to be demolished. The power to do this is not our power (“fleshly”) but God’s power. We have it in our power, however, in one crucial way: we have to want to use it. If we don’t want to be delivered from worldly ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, we won’t be. If we want to be, we can be, but only by God’s power.

So, what are these weapons at our disposal? Certainly the Ephesians 6 passage would be good to refer to again, especially the one “offensive” weapon mentioned there: “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). The instruction in truth and right thinking (including God’s promises and commands) which we find in God’s Word is powerful to correct the erroneous thinking which we pick up by our constant exposure to the world’s ways and by the persisting influence of our own self-centered habits of thought. Along with this “weapon” and all the other “armor” mentioned in Eph. 6, we need also to “pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:18). The guidance of the written Word of God, and the guidance and power of the indwelling Spirit of God—these bring wisdom and power far greater than our own in our conflict with evil. These are “weapons” which “have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4).

We are in a fight. We have weapons sufficient to assure winning. There are, however, at least two ways to assure losing: 1) Failure to acknowledge that there is a battle sets you up for sure
defeat. Many people in the church have little or no concept of how the values of the kingdom of God are unalterably opposed to many of the values of the world around them. They don’t know that they live in a war zone. 2) Failure to identify the true enemy also sets you up for defeat.

This is where many of the Corinthians were vulnerable; they were competing with one another and choosing spiritual leaders for themselves based on fleshly competition. This is where Christians often become vulnerable, as we fight with one another over how to run the church, what style of music to have, or which denomination has the best theology. These are not unimportant issues for discussion and prayer, but if they become our focus we get blindsided by the enemy of the church and of our souls. And the spiritual importance of many of the things we quarrel over simply makes it easier for us to feel like we are being spiritual by “taking a stand” on the issue, without realizing that the way you take a stand (and how you treat “the other side”) is spiritually just as important as having the right opinion, if not more so. If the enemy (Satan) can get us to destroy one another (or at least one another’s influence), he has gotten us to fight for him rather than against him.

“Strongholds” could refer in general to anything opposing God’s will. In this context, Paul is thinking of the arrogant, rebellious ideas and attitudes of those who were distracting and deluding the church through their “arguments,” by which they had “raised up” obstacles “against the knowledge of God” (vs. 5). We can be fairly certain they did not realize they were doing any such thing, but that was precisely the problem. Human pride is the chief raiser of obstacles against knowing God and his ways, because we are so sure that we already know his ways and, in fact, would serve as good models for others if they would only follow us! That is the kind of thinking which has not yet become “captive to obey Christ” (vs. 5). Pride keeps us from seeing our need for instruction or correction. That is the kind of thinking which needs “pulling down” (vs. 4, NKJV).

The Greek word translated “thought” in vs. 5 is noema, which can also be translated as “purpose” or “design.” It can also be rendered as “mind” or, in more sinister contexts, as “plot.” Although the verb (noein) from which this noun (noema) is derived is used by several NT writers, Paul is alone in using the noun, and he uses it only six times, five of those being in 2 Corinthians. It is worthwhile to note them here, with the translation of noema italicized:

2 Cor. 2:11--“And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.”

2 Cor. 3:14--“But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside.”

2 Cor. 4:4--“In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

2 Cor. 10:5--“and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

2 Cor. 11:3--“But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”
[The other text in which Paul refers to noema is Phil. 4:7—"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."]

What is apparent in all these verses is that, regardless of the exact translation of noema, we are talking about the battlefield! This is where the fight is going on. This is where many are held captive by spiritual blindness; this is where people need to be set free. Ironically, this is the one area of life in which most people think that they are free! Others may be able to tell them what to do in some areas of life, but they can’t tell them what to think! They do not know that, paradoxically, the only true freedom of thought is when every thought is “captive to obey Christ” (10:5).

The key that resolves the paradox is the realization that “purpose” is intrinsically connected with “thought” in our human nature. Our thoughts about anything are inseparably connected with questions such as these, even if the questions are not voiced: “What can I do with this?” or “What will I do about it?” or “How can this be used?” or “So what?” Something that is of no use (purpose) to us is something we won’t think about for long. (Granted, the purpose is often entertainment or diversion.) The reason the mind is the battlefield between right and wrong, between good and evil, between God and Satan, is not simply that the mind is how we know things; rather it is where we decide things. The issue involved is more than what we know; it is how we choose. It is far more than intellect (although that is involved); it is the will which is central to noema.

Having our thoughts “captive to obey Christ” (vs. 5) means being submitted to his purposes. He does not so much tell us what to think as he tells us how to think, whose purposes to serve with our thinking. That is the critical issue, and it applies to every area of life—not just in the overtly “spiritual” things, but in the realization that there are no “unspiritual” things, because God made everything and has good purposes for everything. When our thoughts are “captive to obey Christ” we seek and follow God’s good purposes for everything to the extent we understand what those purposes are. Purposes, designs, and thoughts that are not “captive to obey Christ” are instead captive to obey someone else. And the person who has our purposes has us.

In warning the troublemakers in Corinth that he has spiritual weapons at his disposal, Paul has alerted the whole church that he means business on this upcoming visit. He is “ready to punish every disobedience” (vs. 6), but his priority is indicated by the next words: “when your obedience is complete.” What Paul wants, what God wants, is not to punish the rebellious but to reconcile them (5:18-20). Furthermore, the obedience of the majority is the necessary prerequisite for Paul to be able to deal with a stubborn minority. Apparently up to the point of the “tearful letter,” there had been so much fragmentation in the church that disciplinary action would have been difficult, if not impossible.

How does Paul intend to “punish every disobedience,” if some refuse to obey? He does not say specifically here. Perhaps it could be something like what he talked about in 1 Cor. 5:4-5, regarding the immoral member of the church who was to be expelled from the church and thus be deprived of the spiritual safety of its fellowship. (That was perhaps the same man referred to in 2 Cor. 2:6-8, whom Paul said had now suffered enough and should be reaffirmed by the
church.) Paul’s intention to bring that kind of disciplinary action would depend on the obedience of the majority. (This is one of our biggest obstacles to effective church discipline today. There is so much disagreement, not only between denominations but within congregations, about what is right and wrong, and even more disagreement about how to treat those who need discipline. And if some congregation should try to discipline one member, all that person needs to do is move a few blocks to another church and start fresh.)

In 10:7, the NRSV has Paul saying, “Look at what is before your eyes.” The NIV, however, has “You are looking only on the surface of things.” Either translation is grammatically correct; it depends on how you see it fitting into the context. Paul is comparing his real authority as an apostle of Jesus with the pretensions of those he will later call “false apostles” (11:13). The reason Paul has to deal so sternly with the church is because many of them are evaluating by surface appearance only. These observations support the NIV translation. On the other hand, the NRSV translation makes good sense as the introduction to the very next thing Paul will point out—the obvious fact that the very existence of a church in Corinth serves as some validation, at least, of Paul’s ministry. “If . . . you [Corinthian believers] belong to Christ, . . . so also do we.”

Reluctant to boast of his apostolic authority, especially to a church that should need no convincing (vs. 8), Paul nevertheless feels compelled to assert it. But he also is careful to characterize it as authority “which the Lord gave” for the purpose of “building you up” (literally, “unto edification”) and “not for tearing you down.” The “tearing down” is the same language used twice in vss. 4-5 in regard to tearing down (or demolishing, destroying) “strongholds” and “arguments.” That is the Lord’s purpose in giving spiritual authority in the church—not to tear down people but to tear down things (including bad ideas, wrong mindsets) that keep people captive, so that they can be built up. As we have observed repeatedly in this study: the process sometimes includes sorrow, death, and destruction, but the ultimate purpose of God is joy, life, and building up.

Verse nine could almost sound like an apology, if taken alone. Paul wasn’t trying to intimidate people by his strongly worded letters (1 Corinthians and the “tearful letter”). He quotes some of his critics (vs. 10), who have used the forcefulness of his letters to comment still more on the unimpressive nature of his speech and “presence.” This would be a sensitive issue among the Greeks, who highly valued rhetorical skill. Paul was evidently not as impressive in this regard as Apollos (see Acts 18:24-28 on Apollos; 1 Cor. 2:1-5 for Paul’s admission about his own abilities; and 1 Cor. 3:5-6 for the right way to compare the two). No matter. When he comes to Corinth this time, Paul warns (vs. 11), his critics will discover (if they force the issue) that the Paul of his epistles is the real Paul after all!

Foolish Comparisons (10:12-18)
Here we see Paul’s distaste for this business of comparing himself with his critics and rivals. Somewhat sarcastically he writes, “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves” (vs. 12). Those who are so eager to recite their resumes are in a league that Paul does not want to play in! Of course the problem is that their resumes have everything to do with comparing themselves with one another on the basis of superficial impressions, and little or nothing to do with the substance of what has been accomplished by their ministries. Paul says that they “are not wise” (NIV).
The situation Paul is addressing is this: Paul had pioneered the church in Corinth. He had nurtured it from the first day, remaining there for eighteen months before moving on to new fields. After his departure, other preachers and teachers had arrived (such as Apollos, about whom Paul never says anything negative) who had more appeal to some Corinthians than Paul did (this was addressed as the first issue in 1 Cor.). Of course these new teachers were taking advantage of the work that Paul had already done. If Paul had not been there first, there would have been no church to welcome these teachers, no body of believers for them to compete over. Remembering this background will help make sense of the next several sentences from Paul.

If Paul boasts about the church at Corinth and his work there, he will not be ‘out of bounds’ (“beyond limits”), for the history of the church there makes it evident that “God has assigned” Corinth to him as part of his “field” of labor (vs. 13). Paul’s arrival there was not trespassing on someone else’s territory; he did not come there to compete with or to take over an outreach already established by someone else. Paul was the first Christian missionary to go there (vs. 14). So Paul was not boasting “beyond limits, that is, in the labors of others” (vs. 15). This of course was exactly what the lately arrived would-be apostles were doing, trying to make the fruit of Paul’s labors their own. (See also 1 Cor. 3:10, 11; 4:15; Rom. 15:20.)

In contrast to these intruders, who hoped to take credit for and take charge of the church Paul had founded, Paul’s aspiration was to build up the work he started in Corinth to the point that it could become a base for further outreach (vss.15-16), as he had done by this time in Ephesus (Acts 19:10) and perhaps hoped to do in the future in Rome (Rom. 15:24). Here is the heart of a true apostle–not looking for a ready-made position to slip into and make himself comfortable but looking for new challenges, new frontiers. Here is the heart of all genuinely mature Christians, not seeking ways to “commend themselves” by impressing others (especially if it means trying to take credit for work done by others) but seeking always to be “those whom the Lord commends” (vs. 18). The principle is an old one, as indicated by the quotation (vs. 17) from Jeremiah: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (see Jere. 9:22-23; Rom. 15:17-19; 1 Cor. 1:31).

**Godly Jealousy (11:1-4)**

Paul has just stated (10:18) that self-commendation is pointless, but Paul feels compelled by the situation in Corinth to indulge in boasting about his apostleship, something he considers “foolishness,” and he entreats the Corinthians: “Do bear with me!” (11:1, NRSV). The necessity which compels him is the anxiety he expresses in vss. 2-4—a godly jealousy. Some might have thought that Paul was just jealous of the influence over the Corinthian church, which had once been his province alone. Paul insists that his jealousy is not focused on the church’s loyalty to himself, but on their loyalty to Jesus. As the spiritual “father” of the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 4:15), Paul had prepared and “promised” them for “one husband,” as a father would promise his daughter to her future husband (2 Cor. 11:2). As a caring father, Paul wanted to present the Corinthian church as “a chaste virgin to Christ.” (See Eph. 5:27; Rev. 19:7, 8.) The more recently arrived teachers and apostolic pretenders did not share this aspiration; their desire was to have the church for themselves. (On “godly jealousy,” see Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Ezek. 39:25 and other texts in the OT.)
Paul admitted that he was “afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning,” so might the “thoughts” (noema, as in 10:5; see discussion above) of his Corinthian converts “be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (11:3, referring back to Gen. 3). Paul is not saying that this disaster has happened already, but the potential is there because self-centered, selfishly motivated preachers and teachers are in their midst. And the warning signs are evident that the church is vulnerable to exploitation and deception: “For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough” (vs. 4).

Paul is clearly indicating that false teachers are already in their midst and that the church is giving them a hearing. The church is tolerating them, putting up with them “readily enough.” When Paul asked them to put up with his foolish boasting (vs. 1), he used the same verb that he uses here. Paul is asking them to give him, the apostle who first preached Jesus to them, at least as much of an opportunity to speak as they were now giving to teachers who proclaimed “another Jesus” (vs. 4).

Paul does not specify in what way the intruders were misrepresenting Jesus, nor exactly how their spirit was “a different spirit” from the Holy Spirit the Corinthians received when they believed Paul’s message. New Testament scholars continue to debate over the nature of the “Corinthian heresy.” Was it like the legalistic corruption of the gospel which Paul attacked with similar references to “a different gospel,” which he said was no gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-9)? Was it the gnostic-like heresy which John attacked for its denial of the truth of Jesus’ incarnation and its false claims to be inspired by God’s Spirit (1 John 4:1-3)? Or was it like the “Colossian heresy,” which seemed to combine elements of gnosticism and legalism (Col. 2:2-4, 8, 20-23)?

All of these are plausible suspects, since teachers of all these views could have traveled to Corinth as easily as Paul had, or possibly some altogether different invention was threatening in this case. Perhaps because Paul is on the way to Corinth, he does not go into detail about the specific doctrines. He does, however, express strongly his concern that the Corinthians are vulnerable to fall for it, and he clearly ties the threat to the presence and influence of so-called “super apostles” (vs. 5), whom he will later call “false apostles” (vs. 13).

Apostles Great or False (11:5-15)
The bit of “foolishness” for which Paul asked indulgence (vs. 1) was the boasting that he felt constrained to do in order to answer the claims of those he refers to now as “super-apostles” (vs. 5). This has sometimes been taken as a reference to the Twelve Apostles in Jerusalem (thus translated as “the most eminent apostles” in NKJV), in which case Paul would be claiming to be their equal in apostolic authority (see Gal. 2:6-9). But since Paul has just referred to the danger of deception (vss. 2-4), it seems more likely that he is sarcastically referring to the intruders, those whom he later, more bluntly, calls “false apostles” (v. 13).

The intruders who are trying to displace Paul as the guiding influence in the church are making false claims to be apostles; they may even be making false claims to have the backing of the Jerusalem Apostles. Paul is obviously disgusted with having to compare himself with them by matching his reluctant boasts against their eager boasts. Yes, according to the standards of Greek rhetorical style, Paul admits that he is “untrained” (vs. 6), but appearance is not
necessarily reality, and making a good impression with your speech does not guarantee your truthfulness or the quality of your information. While Paul admits that he may not speak as impressively as the intruders, he refuses to be considered their “inferior” in matters of “knowledge.”

In vss. 7-12, Paul has to deal again with the touchy issue of finances, not the Jerusalem collection this time (chs. 8-9) but Paul’s own financial support. Ironically the point of contention is the opposite of what we might expect. Some people in the church at Corinth seem to have resented the fact that they had not been allowed to support Paul financially. Paul recognized the right of ministers to receive financial support, but he voluntarily renounced this right and refused to receive money from the Corinthians while living and ministering there (1 Cor. 9:7-18). He had accepted, however, the support sent to him from Macedonia while he was in Corinth (vss. 8-9; see also Acts 18:3-5; Phil. 4:15). But Paul’s policy was criticized by his rivals as an insult to the Corinthians.

While in Macedonia, Paul had followed the same policy as he did in Corinth: he refused to be a financial burden on the people. Paul wanted to teach by example as well as by words; thus he worked to support himself and taught others to do the same (2 Thess. 3:7-10). He was willing to accept the kind of financial aid which would free him from the necessity of working with his hands (Acts 18:5), but only if the money came from another location, as an expression of the desire to further the spread of the gospel. Otherwise, Paul supported himself by tentmaking, a craft held in low social esteem by the Greeks (Acts 18:3).

Perhaps because of their cultural pride, some in Corinth felt insulted by the manual labor of a spiritual leader. Paul points out that, to the contrary, he had humbled himself, not them, by his labors (vs. 7). His policy of financial independence from those to whom he was currently ministering was not intended to embarrass the Corinthians. Rather he desired that they be “exalted” (lifted up or elevated) by the gospel. Perhaps he insisted it be “free of charge” in order that they understand better the free grace of Christ. (Does it hurt our pride when we realize we cannot pay for it?)

Paul would not insist that any other minister follow his personal policy, but he does insist again that he will stick by this policy for himself, regardless of how he might be criticized for it (vss. 9-10; reiterating what he had pledged in 1 Cor. 9:15--“I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast” [NIV]). Rather ironically Paul asks (vs. 11) whether this could be construed as evidence of his lack of love for the Corinthians: he doesn’t burden them!

In view of the would-be replacements for Paul, he says he has more reason than ever to continue his financial policy. He knows that the last thing they will want to do is become his equal in this matter (vs. 12). If they are as selfishly motivated as Paul feels they are, they will not compete with him in offering the gospel “free of charge”? How can he be so sure that they will not imitate him in this regard? Because (“For”) they are “false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (vs. 13). Paul knew their motive was not the generous grace of God which he wrote about in chapter 8; their motive was self-enrichment and self-importance. If preaching the gospel started costing them money instead of paying them (as the Corinthians seemed eager to do), they would not preach; they would find another line of
work, probably start peddling another philosophy or religion (recall 2:11; there were many itinerant teachers traveling about in the Roman Empire in Paul’s day, teaching whatever would support them).

Their self-centered motivation meant that they were not servants of Christ as they claimed; they were serving themselves. And, probably without realizing it, they were serving Satan. By pandering to the wishes of the audiences they preached to please, they were “peddling the word of God” (2:11), and serving as Satan’s “ministers” (11:15, NRSV) or “servants” (NIV). Self-centered teachers and preachers know how to appeal to self-centered audiences, and this has always been one of Satan’s chief lines of attack. He “disguises himself as an angel of light” (vs. 14) mostly in the sense of seeming to bring us what we want—he wants us to regard him as the bringer of the good news we’ve been wanting. But it’s a disguise, a masquerade. He offers something that appeals to us, something which we think will make our lives better, more fulfilling and free. When the self-centered appeal entices our response, however, it turns out to be the opposite of what was offered: our lives are worse, more empty because the appetites are stimulated without bringing satisfaction to the soul, and we become enslaved to the very thing which promised freedom (money, power, pleasure, etc.). This was the very tactic the serpent used in the Garden of Eden (vs. 3).

So now we know what Paul really thinks of his rivals in Corinth and why he is so concerned about their influence in the church. These false apostles, motivated by their own selfishness, will influence anyone who heeds them to become more like them. *Their selfishness will be contagious*, and the church’s “thoughts [noema, “purposes”] will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (vs. 3). There is far more at stake here than simply which preacher is their favorite. The issue is the direction of the heart of each believer. The gospel Paul preached to them exalted Christ, the crucified Savior (1 Cor. 2:2), and the lifting up of the people was a consequence of faith in him and focus on him. The so-called gospel of the false apostles focused on the teachers themselves and promised exaltation to their hearers, appealing to their selfish motives. Whatever doctrinal differences there might have been otherwise we are not told, but the heart of the heresy has been revealed by Paul’s words in vss. 12-15. The *heart of the heresy* is its *mainspring of motivation*—the *promotion of self* instead of the *preaching of Jesus*. And of course the promotion of self instead of the glory of God was how our ancestors made the first wrong move in the Garden, deceived by the serpent into thinking life would be better if we decided what would be good for us rather than letting God tell us.
Questions from LessonMaker by NavPress

2 Corinthians 10:1-18 - Paul's Defense of His Ministry

OPEN IT
1. When have you ever had to defend your actions to another person?

EXPLORE IT
2. What was the source of Paul's authority and influence over others? (10:1)
3. Of what did Paul's opponents accuse him? (10:2)
4. How did the spiritual warfare that Paul fought, and the spiritual weapons that he used, differ from ordinary warfare and weapons? (10:3-4)
5. What did Paul want to demolish? How? (10:4-6)
6. What did Paul take captive? (10:5)
7. Why would Paul's opponents try to convince the Corinthians that Paul was unimpressive in person? (10:10)
8. Why did Paul endorse boasting in the Lord, but condemn all other forms of boasting? (10:18)

GET IT
9. Why do people often look only on the surface of things?
10. How can looking only on the surface mislead us?
11. What surface judgments do you tend to make?
12. What spiritual weapons are available to you?

APPLY IT
13. In what area of life do you need to defend the truth? How?
2 Corinthians 11:1-15 - Paul and the False Apostles

OPEN IT
1. When is it difficult to hold to your convictions?

2. What widely followed practices might a person be criticized for not doing?

EXPLORE IT
3. Why did Paul ask the Corinthians to put up with him? (11:1)

4. Why was Paul jealous? (11:2)

5. To what biblical event did Paul compare the Corinthians' risk of deception? (11:3)

6. Why was Paul sarcastic about the "super-apostles"? (11:5)

7. Why did Paul "lower himself"? (11:7)

8. Why did Paul accept support from the Macedonian Christians while in Corinth, yet refuse to accept money from the Corinthians themselves? (11:8-12)

GET IT
9. What qualities do you think should characterize a minister of Christ?

10. How does godly jealousy differ from worldly jealousy?

11. How do modern-day false prophets try to deceive Christians?

12. What can you do to avoid being deceived in spiritual matters by the world?

APPLY IT
13. What is one step you can take this week to guard against the deceit of false prophets and evil pressures?
In last week’s lesson (10:1-11:15) we learned that Paul’s legitimate spiritual authority was powerful for the tearing down of “strongholds” (10:4), but its God-given purpose was to build up the Corinthian believers, not tear them down (10:8). We also learned that Paul considered it foolish to boast about his authority and spiritual experiences; nevertheless he felt it necessary in order to deal with the intruders in Corinth, whom he finally identified as “false apostles” (11:13). Still referring to these false apostles in this week’s passage, Paul scolds the Corinthians for having been too welcoming and tolerant (11:16ff.). Yes, there is such a thing as being too tolerant!

Misguided Toleration (11:16-21)
Paul continues to be apologetic about the necessity of boasting. He feels it is not Christlike to boast (vs. 17), but the intruding false apostles are making headway through their boasting “according to human standards” (vs. 18) or “in the way the world does” (NIV; literally, “according to the flesh”). To counter them, Paul feels constrained to boast “a little” (vs.11), but you can really hear the sarcasm in his words as he reluctantly stoops to this level.

Having already asked the Corinthians to put up with a little foolishness (11:1), Paul now expresses his confidence that they will indeed be patient with his foolish boasting, since they “gladly put up with fools” (vs. 19). They have already demonstrated a regrettable readiness to put up with the foolishness of the false apostles! As those who profess to be “wise,” they are strangely attracted to foolishness! (Their pretensions to wisdom were mentioned in 1 Cor. 4:10 as well.) These “wise” Corinthians “put up with it when someone makes slaves” of them, “preys upon” them, “takes advantage” of them, “puts on airs” (NIV: “pushes himself forward”), or “gives [them] a slap in the face” (vs. 20)! Although Paul is no doubt speaking metaphorically with regard to the slap in the face, he is expressing astonishment at how some in the church are letting themselves be used and abused by these so-called “super apostles.”

Clearly Paul sees the intruders as exploiting the church for personal glory and enrichment. Why have they been able to do this? Because they have appealed to the naive pride of the young Corinthian Christians. One of the most insidious aspects of the false prophet’s or false teacher’s appeal is the (implicit or explicit) offer of special knowledge, unique spiritual experiences, or something else which will set you apart from others, make you part of a more exclusive group, and serve as a mark of superiority. Such pride of feeling important or superior makes us vulnerable to those who know how to appeal to that pride (just like ‘scam artists’ appeal to our greed). The Corinthians’ pride in their spiritual superiority made them vulnerable to manipulation by false apostles, in the same way that the serpent successfully appealed to Eve’s desire to be more and know more (11:3). As with Eve, so with some in Corinth, and so with many today who become unwitting victims of false spiritual leaders: Leaders whose motives are selfish know how to appeal to selfish motives in others; that is the secret to their success (see also 2 Peter 2:2-3, 14, 18-19). In a sarcastic echo of the charge made against him (10:10), Paul admits he was “too weak” to mistreat them that way (vs 21).
Paul’s Reluctant Boasting (11:21-33)

After threatening to do so since 10:8, Paul is finally going to boast, after yet another protest that to do so is to speak “as a fool” (vs. 21). From vs. 22, we can discern that one of the false apostles’ boast concerned their Jewish heritage. Paul need not back down there, since his pedigree is as ‘thoroughbred’ as anyone’s (see also Phil. 3:4-5). Of course Paul regards his Jewish heritage as precious (Rom. 9:3-5), but not as something which makes him superior as a Christian. In Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek” (Gal. 3:28); the previously excluded Gentiles have now been fully included (Eph. 2:12-13, 19). A Jewish Christian has a heritage for which he or she should be grateful, but not a platform for presuming superiority in the church. (The same thing could be said for someone with a Methodist background, or some other honored tradition.)

Certainly Paul did not need to feel inferior to the “super apostles” based on religious heritage. If they wanted to boast about that, so could he. But if they presented themselves as superior “ministers” or “servants” of Christ, how could he respond? Reluctantly he has to say, “I am a better one” (vs. 23). This, he laments, is worse than foolishness: “I am talking like a madman.” (NIV: “I am out of my mind to talk like this.”) Who really has a right to say who is the better servant of Christ? Ultimately, only Jesus himself! Paul feels strong distaste for this kind of comparison, but the situation requires it.

So how will Paul make the case that he is a better servant of Jesus? Will he tell us how many have been converted in his evangelistic meetings? Will he tell us how many have been healed when he prayed? Will he tell us how often he has cast out demons? Paul could have mentioned all these things and more. Instead he tells of experiences which many people (then and now) would consider signs of weakness rather than strength. Some of the events referred to here can be found in Acts; many cannot, since Acts is not an exhaustive account. Note also that the hardships endured in Acts 20:3--28:31 all occurred after the writing of 2 Corinthians. (Recall also 2 Cor. 4:17--“slight momentary affliction.”)

“Forty lashes minus one” (vs. 24) refers to punishment by Jewish authorities, whether in Palestine or in Jewish communities in the Dispersion (“Diaspora”) throughout the Roman Empire. Paul had this experience “five times”! (To avoid accidental transgression of the Law (Deut. 25:3), the Jews always stopped short of the maximum permitted.)

“Three times I was beaten with rods” (vs. 25) refers to punishment by secular Roman authorities (Acts 16:22).

“Stoning” (vs. 25) was a Jewish form of execution, carried out on Paul at Jewish instigation (Acts 14:19-20). Paul was left for dead, but God raised him up.

“Three times I was shipwrecked” (vs. 25) does not include the account we have in Acts 27:13-44. That happened later.

Besides these numbered experiences of extreme physical suffering, Paul refers in generalities to “labors,” “imprisonments,” “countless floggings,” and being “often near death” (vs. 23). He recalls “frequent journeys” for the sake of Christ (vs. 26), which exposed him to many
“dangers”—rivers, bandits, Jewish and Gentile opponents, in the city, in deserted places, at sea, and from “false brothers and sisters” (such as the “false apostles” at Corinth!). In addition to “toil and hardship,” going “sleepless,” “hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked” (i.e., insufficiently clothed for the weather), and “other things” not named, Paul had to contend constantly with “daily pressure because of . . . anxiety for all the churches,” not just the church in Corinth (vss. 27-28).

The contrast between Paul and those who foolishly boast of their spiritual superiority is perhaps seen more clearly in 11:29 than anywhere else. Rather than boasting of his strength and looking with contempt on those who are “weak” or those who “stumble” (NIV: “led into sin”), Paul identifies with them in their hurt (see 1 Cor. 12:26) and is “indignant” (NIV: “inwardly burn”). Toward weak or wayward Christians Paul is an example of the instruction he gives us all: “if anyone is detected in a transgression, . . . restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” and “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:1-2). In contrast to such humility and genuine servanthood, the spiritually proud tend to feel that they have ‘scored points’ of superiority when someone else has stumbled.

Which attitude is more like Christ’s? Does Jesus hold himself aloof from our sufferings and weaknesses? Why then are aloofness and seeming invincibility often perceived as signs of spiritual power? Are we impressed by the spiritual boasts we sometimes hear from those who claim not to have had a day of sickness in decades? Some claim to have had visions and even tours of heaven. These claims are hard to prove or disprove. Would their claims be more believable if the compassion of Jesus were more evident, rather than a smug superiority which implies pity for those unable to live on such an exalted plane?

“If I must boast,” says Paul, “I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:30). The ongoing (and sometimes dramatic) vulnerabilities Paul has just listed (vss. 23-29) show not only his frailties but also his faithfulness to the heart of Jesus for the people for whom he died. And nothing is more important to Paul than knowing and being conformed to the heart of Jesus (see Phil. 3:8-11). Paul will elaborate further (ch.12) on how his weakness has become the opportunity for revealing the power of God. Just before he does that, however, he recounts one more episode which a proud man would surely find humiliating, and certainly not something about which to be boasting.

In vss. 32-33, Paul gives his account of an episode Luke mentions in Acts 9:23-25. Aretas IV was king of the Nabatean Arabs, with his capital in Petra. The “governor” of Damascus seems to have been acting under the orders of Aretas, and apparently in collusion with certain Jews who were lying in wait. Historians are interested in this event and Paul’s mention of the king and the governor of these cities because it sheds light on the governmental structures in place at the time. Paul’s interest is very different: he seems to regard this event (which happened quite early in his career as a servant of Christ) as an ironic picture of the kind of ‘spiritual giant’ he is! He has to “boast” about making humiliating escapes from those who want to destroy him. Someone with more ‘spiritual power’ would, no doubt, have walked out in broad daylight and perhaps called fire down from heaven in the process! But then such a person would not likely have described himself as a “clay jar” (recall 4:7, which epitomizes the tone of this whole epistle).
Exalted and humbled (12:1-13)
Still writing under the necessity of boasting, and still protesting its futility, Paul moves from recounting his vulnerabilities and humiliations to talk about “visions and revelations of the Lord” (12:1). This begins to sound more like what we would expect from “boasting”—narratives of exploits or adventures which would make others envious (I certainly don’t envy Paul’s shipwrecks or beatings, do you?). Quite transparently Paul refers to himself in vs. 2, but his reserve in referring to himself indirectly (not saying “I”) avoids boasting about himself rather than the Lord who granted such a privilege.

“Fourteen years ago” (vs. 2) would be about 42 A.D., in the period of his Christian life not described in Acts. The “third heaven” probably means the very presence of God, in contrast to the sky and the starry heavens visible from earth. “Paradise” (vs.4), originally a Persian word for “garden” or “delightful place,” is identified here with “the third heaven.” Its meaning in Scripture always includes the awareness of blissful fellowship with God (Luke 23:43; Rev. 2:7).

It’s interesting that Paul knows the time frame and the place visited, but not the mode: He does not know whether it was “in the body or out of the body,” a limitation which he emphasizes by repeating it (vs. 2-3). “God knows,” but Paul does not. Having such an exalted experience as the one Paul describes here has not given him all the answers, even about his own experience! He certainly would not claim to have all the answers for any question that someone might have about spiritual realities. Just see how different that is from many who claim to have had unique spiritual experiences and proceed to set themselves up (or allow others to do so) as “gurus” to guide others into their privileges! With regard to elements of Paul’s own experience and many other spiritual questions, the only honest answer is the humble answer—“God knows.”

Another mixed aspect of this exalted experience was Paul’s inability to tell what he had heard in Paradise. “Things that are not to be told” (vs. 4) could be interpreted as “inexpressible things” (NIV), but Paul indicates that he was forbidden to speak them, rather than simply being unable. Not being able to tell and being forbidden to tell are, of course, both possible at the same time. Either way, the human limitation (“mortal” or “man”) is highlighted yet again. Something that rings true about this whole account is that Paul’s exalted experience of the heavenly realities has made him more aware of his humanity. Rather than delivering him from human limitations, the experience has brought him to a deeper realization of his finite humanity. Genuine experiences of God make us aware of his greatness, not ours. They lead us to boast about God, not ourselves.

Paul is willing (however reluctantly) to boast of “such a one” (vs. 5), i.e., about someone being granted such a privileged experience but not, he says, “on my own behalf . . . except of my weaknesses.” That seems like a rather fine distinction. “Such a one” obviously refers to Paul himself. Why is he willing to boast about “such a one” but not himself? For one thing, Paul does have a testimony of experiencing God’s wonderful blessings and revelations. Not to speak of them at all, especially in the circumstances of others making claims for themselves in Corinth, might actually mislead the people. They might conclude that, since Paul is not talking about his spiritual experiences, he must not have any, or at least none worth mentioning. On the other hand, Paul knows that if he talks about these experiences very much, the effect will be to focus attention on himself and to influence people to put him on a pedestal the way some have done with the false apostles (“super apostles”).
Somehow Paul wants to express himself in a way that avoids displacing Jesus as the center of attention and admiration. When people look at Paul, he wants them to see someone like themselves in needing and exhibiting the grace of God, someone who lives by the life of Jesus just as they can. Paul does not want to be an example of superiority to other humans but an example of what any human can be when we acknowledge our limitations and God’s all-sufficient power. So, forced to boast, Paul does have something to boast about truthfully (vs. 6), but he restrains his language (“I refrain”) so that others will evaluate his life and ministry by the actual effects (what we could call ‘fruit’) rather than by the boasts. Apparently Paul did not share the view of many in our culture that “image is everything”; he had no desire to make a superficial impression.

Verse seven is notoriously difficult, for a number of reasons, although its purpose in this context is plain enough. In mentioning the “thorn in the flesh” Paul emphasizes his limitations and weaknesses even while forced to boast about his exalted spiritual experiences.

The first difficulty of vs.7 involves the first clause. The NRSV continues the sentence from vs. 6, thus connecting “even considering the exceptional character of the revelations” with Paul’s desire for people to evaluate him by reality, not reputation. The NIV connects the words with what comes after (“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations . . .”). Either construction makes good sense in the context, although the NIV seems more straightforward.

The more important question, of course, concerns the “thorn,” particularly the nature of it. Its function Paul clearly identifies: “to keep me from being too elated” (“conceited,” NIV). Because Paul does not identify the precise nature of the “thorn,” many suggestions have been put forward over the centuries, including the following: physical illness or impairment, perhaps recurrent malaria or a vision problem (Gal. 4:13-15); persecution; harassment by false teachers; or persistent spiritual conflict. “In the flesh” suggests a physical problem, yet there is clearly a spiritual dimension involved as well. “Was given” indicates that the “thorn” was, at least indirectly, allowed by God. Whatever the “thorn” was, it was not a good thing in itself but “a messenger of Satan to torment me.” That would seem to indicate not only Paul’s personal discomfort but something which tended to hinder his ministry. Yet one important result of the presence of the “thorn” was good: Paul was kept humble, despite the exalted visions and revelations.

More than one Biblical scholar has suggested that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul’s ambiguity in referring to his “thorn.” Since we don’t know whether he was referring to a physical problem, an ongoing challenge with some relationship with another Christian, or the harassment of false teachers who kept following him around, or something altogether different, we can identify with Paul in the persistence of the problem. If Paul had said specifically what the problem was, we might not take the lesson so easily to heart for ourselves when we are contending with our own stubborn “thorns,” whatever they may be.

God did not rebuke Paul for asking for deliverance from his “thorn.” God did, however, reveal to him that divine glory can be manifested in more than one way. Surely God’s glory could have
been shown by a miraculous removal of the “thorn,” and Paul had experienced miraculous deliverance more than once (as implied by all the things he had survived in 11:23-27). In this case, after Paul had “appealed” to God “three times” for its removal, God’s answer continued to be: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (vss. 8-9). In the context, not only of this particular passage but of the whole epistle, this means that God’s power is not diminished in the least by being present in a weak, vulnerable human being. The powerful effect of God’s grace in ministry would not be nullified by the “thorn” which hindered Paul as a vulnerable human being. The converse is also true, a human is not delivered from being human (with all the vulnerability and limitations associated with that status) just because the Almighty God is present. Having Almighty God present in my life does not make me almighty.

In our day we sometimes hear spiritual boasts that would have us believe that a truly faith-filled person will never get anything but ‘yes’ for a request made to God. Paul, in this case, was effectively told ‘no.’ He asked God to remove it; God said ‘no’ by saying “My grace is sufficient for you.” (The interpretation which some well known ministers have tried to put on this—that God was telling Paul to take care of the thorn himself by exercising the authority he had been given by God’s grace—is not just slightly wrong; it contradicts the whole context of this passage and this epistle.) God was telling Paul to rely on his continuing presence rather than the requested act of power. God was promising that his power would actually be manifested in its perfection in the midst of Paul’s weakness, in some way that would not be possible if Paul were to be delivered from the weakness.

This presents Paul and us with a choice regarding our priorities: Would I rather enjoy freedom from discomfort or the fullness and perfection of God’s power? If you’re like me, you would prefer to rephrase the issue and experience the perfection of God’s power through the deliverance from all discomfort! And often that is how we experience God’s power--by his miraculous intervention. But what if he gives us the answer he gave Paul? What if he instructs us to trust sustaining grace rather than delivering grace? If our heart is like Paul’s, we “will boast all the more gladly” about our weaknesses, if that is what it takes for “the power of Christ” to dwell in us (vs. 9). Indeed, we will be grateful that God wants to give us something better than the thing we asked for; he wants to give us himself, the Source of all good things. In having him, regardless of our present circumstances, which may be uncomfortable, we have everything we truly need. Therefore, like Paul, we can be “content” (vs. 10) or even “delight in” (NIV) weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities,” as long as they are “for the sake of Christ,” knowing that “whenever I am weak” [in the limitations of my own strength], “then I am strong” [by leaning on the strength of the Almighty]. This is not because we enjoy weakness or frustrations more than anybody else; it is because we desire, above all else, that God perfect his work and show his grace in us (cf. Phil. 4:11-13.) More than the praise of others, more than our own self-satisfied pride, we desire the approval of God.

Only after this extended discussion of his weakness does Paul mention the “signs and wonders and mighty works” which also support his legitimate apostolic claims (12:12). They appear here as a simple reference without elaboration or dazzling details, only after Paul has repeatedly protested the necessity of having to boast at all, and after he has focused his boast on things others might wish to forget. In fact, Paul seems to be humiliated by the necessity imposed on him by the Corinthians: “you should have been the ones commending me” (vs. 11). They don’t
need to be told about the genuine effects of Paul’s ministry—they experienced them firsthand! Their life in Christ came through his ministry! What do the “super-apostles” have to offer that is better than that? And if Paul has slighted or insulted them, perhaps it was in the fact that he did not “burden” them by receiving financial support from them while he lived there (vs. 12).

“Forgive me this wrong!” he says, offering a sarcastic apology for his generosity! (Cf. 11:7-11.)

**Announcement of a Third Visit (12:14-13:10)**

Paul’s first visit brought the gospel to Corinth. He founded the church and remained in the city for about eighteen months. The second was the “painful visit” we have frequently referred to in this series. As he writes 2 Corinthians, Paul is already in Macedonia, just north of Greece proper, and will soon be traveling south to Corinth. Surely Paul and the Christians in Corinth, too, are wondering what it will be like this time. We know that Paul is praying that it will not be like the second visit, and he mentions his continuing anxieties about the impending encounter several times throughout this epistle (1:23; 2:1; 10:2, 11; 12:20-21; 13:1-2, 10). With all the uncertainties which may be in Paul’s mind and the church’s mind about this next visit, Paul wants one thing clearly understood: he will not change his policy of not being a burden to them (12:14, reiterating 11:9-10).

Paul is not looking for ways the Corinthian believers can benefit him (as the false apostles are); rather, like a true spiritual parent, he is looking for ways that he can benefit them (12:14). Apparently some in Corinth do not trust him, however. Even though they have to acknowledge that Paul does not take money from them directly, he certainly has asked for it in the collection for Jerusalem. That would seem to be the complaint lying back of Paul’s words in vs. 16, as he echoes what some of his accusers have apparently said about him, that he is a “crafty” person, who took them in by “deceit.” Paul refutes the charge by citing the character of his envoys, whom the Corinthians know to be honest (vss. 17-18). If they know Titus is trustworthy, whom Paul sent, they should trust Paul, too. (See 8:6, 16-24.)

As much as this epistle has had to concentrate on “defending” Paul’s integrity and his legitimate apostolic authority (vs. 19), Paul insists that the main motive “all along” has been “building you up” (“strengthening,” NIV). This is precisely what he said earlier (10:8) was the true purpose of his authority. Paul’s apostolic authority and his apostolic responsibility are not to defend his reputation with anyone, but to serve Christ Jesus and to love people in his name. If he writes a letter in his role as an apostle of Jesus (1:1), it had better be to serve Jesus’ purpose and not his own. This is true for whoever speaks as Jesus’ servant, whether as an apostle, evangelist, prophet, teacher, pastor, or member of Jesus’ body. This could be a telling point of self-examination for all of us: how often are my words motivated by my perceived need to defend myself or my reputation, instead of by the opportunity to promote healthy growth in godly directions for those whom I influence?

Having reaffirmed his loving motive yet again (vs. 19), Paul discloses his heart’s anxieties about the upcoming, third visit (vss. 20-21):

For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. [21] I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and that I may have to mourn over many who previously sinned
and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness that they have practiced.

This is probably a pretty good indication of what had made the second visit “painful.” These are the kind of things Paul did not want to experience again. His anxieties are not unreasonable in light of the history of the Corinthian church. Although most of the church has been moved to genuine repentance by the “tearful letter,” which Titus had delivered (7:8-11), Paul knows that it only takes a few, sometimes only one person, to stir up turmoil in a church. He obviously is concerned that some kind of resistance and rebellion might occur, linked to disciplinary issues that Paul has been addressing since 1 Corinthians. Indeed, the challenge to Paul’s authority in the church was far from being a mere concern for who could give the church better guidance, or who was the best preacher. Some had resisted Paul’s authority because they were unwilling to abandon ungodly behavior (see 1 Cor. 5:9-11; 6:18-20). If we are unwilling to change our ways, we will seek “spiritual leadership” from those who are willing to lead us the way we want to go. That’s a danger for all of us.

Paul sees particular significance in the fact that this next visit will be “the third time” (13:1), for the ancient standard for establishing the truth was “two or three witnesses” in agreement (citing Deut. 19:15). The church will find Paul saying the same thing he has said before about the moral and disciplinary order of the members. God’s standard has not changed; so Paul cannot change his responsibility in order to accommodate the Corinthians’ desire to compromise with their culture. Thus he warns (vs. 2) that disciplinary action is certain, just as he had warned on his “second visit” (i.e., the “painful” one).

Those who have contempt for Paul because they think he is “weak” (10:10) will find that he really does speak with the authority of Christ, who was able to be weak enough to be “crucified” and yet was the ultimate example of “the power of God” (13:3-4). When you listen to Jesus’ own interpretation of his death, you know that it was only because he was so strong that he was able to be so weak (see, for example, John 10:18). If Jesus had not been strong enough to be so weak (for our sake), he would not have been strong enough to save us. That’s why the cross of Jesus, paradoxically, is a sign of weakness to some and a sign of power to others (1 Cor. 1:18, 25, 27).

Likewise, Paul and we can be “weak in him” (vs. 4) and at the same time powerful (“by the power of God”) in acting and speaking as Christ’s agents in dealing with others. They may regard us as weak, but if we are really submitted and responsive to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and the character of Jesus, God’s power will work through us. Those who crucified Jesus thought that their power had prevailed that day. To all appearances it had, but that was not the last day, and appearances have a way of eventually giving way to reality. What and who had actually prevailed on Good Friday became evident on Easter!

Those who were seeking from Paul some “proof” of his authority (vs. 3) are intent on examining the wrong person. To those who were critical of Paul, to the whole church in Corinth, and to us Paul says, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves” (vs. 5, “yourselves” is emphatic in the Greek). That is not to say we should not examine and discern carefully the life of someone who presents himself as a spiritual leader, but in the case of Paul
and the Corinthians the issue was quite straightforward: If they “realize that Jesus Christ is in” them, how did he come to be there? Was it not through Paul’s ministry? That does not mean, necessarily, that everything Paul says and does is perfect, but the basic reality of their genuine relationship with Jesus is the most important value they need to guard and promote with all diligence. That is what Paul is devoted to.

Paul sincerely hopes that they will have a good opinion of him, and not judge him to have “failed” (vs. 6). But the most important thing is “not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed” (vs. 7). The balance of Paul’s concern here can be illustrated by a hypothetical question: Which is better—a popular teacher whose students do not learn what they need to learn, or an unpopular teacher whose students learn what they truly need to know? Of course, anyone would prefer a third alternative, a popular teacher whose students learn well, but posing the question in its extremes highlights for us what is truly important in the task of teaching.

That is why Paul does not mind being thought of as “weak” (vs. 9), as long as his spiritual children are “strong.” That is all Paul is aiming for and praying for, that they “may become perfect,” mended, healed of their remaining imperfections, to become all that God intends them to be. In the final analysis, the Corinthians’ opinion of him is not that important. It is important, rather, that they “not do anything wrong” (vs. 7). If they do what is right, there will be no conflict with Paul, for he “cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth” (vs. 8). There will be no need for him to exercise his apostolic “authority” in a “severe” way. As Paul says yet again (vs. 10; see 10:8; 12:19), his authority from the Lord is “for building up and not for tearing down.”

Concluding Greetings (13:11-14)
At last Paul brings his epistle to a close, but not without some final exhortations. “Put things in order” (vs. 11) is translated in the NIV as “aim for perfection.” It could also be translated as “mend your ways,” as this is the word often used for mending of nets and such things. The verb used here (katartidzo) is the cognate for the noun used in vs. 9 (katartisis), which was translated “perfect” (NIV: “perfection”) in the sense of being completely restored. In vs. 9, Paul said he was praying for the result which he here instructs the Corinthians to seek with their own efforts and energies. As always, the grace of God will be required to achieve this godly outcome, but it will not happen if people do not want it and work for it.

Paul exhorts them to listen to his exhortation (“appeal”) and to “agree with one another” (NIV: “be of one mind,” cf. Phil 2:5). Since 1 Cor. 1:10ff., Paul has been exhorting them to abandon their contentious rivalries and to “live in peace.” The “God of love and peace” is able to help us do this, and his promise to be with us should prompt our efforts to live in a way that is appropriate for fellowship with such a God.

The cultural equivalent for us of “a holy kiss” (vs. 12) is probably a warm handshake. Whether it’s a kiss, a handshake, or a hug, it cannot be “holy” in the sense meant here if there is not a recognition of the holy presence of “the God of love and peace.” Whatever the cultural mode of greeting (in Asia, it’s bowing), the sign of fellowship or reconciliation will be valid only to the extent there is real fellowship. Thus, we can hear Paul’s benediction (vs. 14) not just as a piece
of formality or liturgy (although its Trinitarian form is important to notice), but as a real prayer and blessing for those who will receive it. This verse expresses exactly what the Corinthian church needed and what the church needs today.

We need “the grace” experienced through acknowledging and receiving Jesus as Lord. We need “the love of God,” which we receive from God and which enables us to love God and one another. We need the genuine, generous sharing of “communion” (NIV: “fellowship”) which the Holy Spirit alone can give and sustain. Receive Paul’s benediction for yourself and pass it on to others who will receive it: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Summary Reflection
Considering the fact that Paul, in Macedonia at the time of writing, would soon be in Corinth himself, this epistle is remarkable for its length. It is also remarkable for its intensity and its focus almost completely on the task of re-educating the Corinthians concerning the true nature of spiritual reality (1 Cor. is devoted to this as well, but touching on a greater variety of topics). A partial exception to this focus might be chapters 8-9, where Paul instructed and exhorted concerning the offering for the church in Jerusalem. Even that topic, however, is related to the issue of how we decide what is important, and what we can do to make life good. What we do with our money and other resources is, in the final analysis, a spiritual matter. Thus, even when ‘taking up the collection,’ Paul was teaching what it is to have a truly spiritual perspective.

We have said earlier that the theme of the entire book could be found in 2 Cor. 4:7--“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” Less graphically we could say that 2 Corinthians is about the unlimited power of God present and at work in his weak, limited people, including the Apostle Paul. From the perspective especially of chapters 10-13, you can see that the Corinthian church needed Paul’s correction concerning what is true strength and what may be weakness disguised as power. The allurement of false apostles or false teachers (then and now) is to make a display of power (even if it is only verbal impressiveness) and to offer power to those who will set them up as special. When we know what real power is, however, we know that it’s demonstrated by a servant heart and complete dependence on the power of God, not human power.
Questions from LessonMaker by NavPress

2 Corinthians 11:16-33 - Paul Boasts About His Sufferings
OPEN IT
1. What is the most dramatic testimony you have ever heard?

EXPLORE IT
2. Why did Paul write, "Let no one take me for a fool"? (11:16)
3. What did the Corinthians put up with too easily? (11:19-20)
4. Why did Paul boast about his hardships? (11:24-26)

GET IT
5. How do you think Christian pastors today should handle rivalry and competition in the church?
6. What does it mean to boast in the Lord?
7. What are the dangers of boasting?
8. What do you think are some of the pressures your pastor feels in leading your congregation?

APPLY IT
9. How could you encourage the leaders in your church who may be enduring hardship?

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 - Paul's Vision and His Thorn
OPEN IT
1. Why are we typically afraid to disclose our weaknesses to each other?

EXPLORE IT
2. Why did Paul tell the Corinthians about his vision, despite his misgivings? (12:2-4)
3. Why was Paul reluctant to speak about his vision? (12:3-6)
4. What prevented Paul from developing a proud spirit? (12:7)
5. Who was responsible for giving Paul a "thorn in the flesh"? (12:7)
6. What was Paul's response to his "thorn"? (12:8, 10)
GET IT
7. What are some weaknesses or afflictions that you find difficult to live with?

8. How can you allow the Lord's power to take over where you are weak?
9. How does the Christian perspective on power and weakness differ from that of the world?

10. What does this passage teach us about the problem of evil and God's sovereign will?

11. What difference should it make knowing God has promised you an all-sufficient grace?

APPLY IT
12. In what area of your life do you want to rely more on God's strength and power, rather than your own?

2 Corinthians 12:11-21 - Paul's Concern for the Corinthians
OPEN IT
1. How can a gesture of goodwill be misunderstood or unappreciated?

EXPLORE IT
2. What did Paul want from the Corinthians? (12:14)

3. To what did Paul liken his relationship with the Corinthians? (12:14)

4. Why did Paul ask the Corinthians, "If I love you more, will you love me less?" (12:15)

GET IT
5. What role do you think signs, wonders, and miracles should play in Christian evangelism today?

6. What is an example of an experience that taught you a lesson, but which you would not want to go through again?

7. What misgivings might Paul have after visiting your church?

APPLY IT
8. In the future, how can you follow Paul's example in healing divisions between Christians?
2 Corinthians 13:1-14 - Final Warnings

OPEN IT
1. How would you prepare for a visit from a friend you haven't seen in a long time?

EXPLORE IT
2. Why did Paul return to Corinth a third time? (13:1-2)

3. Why did Paul advise the Corinthians to examine themselves? (13:5)

4. How could the Corinthians "fail the test"? (13:5)

5. What does this passage reveal about Paul's concern for the Corinthians' spiritual welfare and regard for his own reputation? (13:7)

6. For what purpose had God given authority to Paul? (13:10)

GET IT
7. When should we demand proof that a person's teaching about God is true?

8. How do you think a person could fail the test of faith?

9. What does it mean to submit to those in authority in the church?

10. What does it mean to aim for perfection?

APPLY IT
11. In what way would it be helpful for you to test your faith? How could you?

12. What realistic, measurable goal could you set for your own growth toward godliness this week?