

## LESSON TWENTY-FOUR 2 Corinthians 13

### Warning of impending discipline -- 13:1-4.

Vv. 1-2

After expressing his personal forebodings about the forthcoming third visit (12 :20, 21), Paul issues two direct warnings on the basis of those fears: "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (v.1) and "On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others" (v.2).

How many trips would this make? Despite the attempts of some to find this a reference to only Paul's second visit, the language is capable of only one natural and unforced meaning – Paul, having visited Corinth on two prior occasions, is now ready to make this third visit. Upon the occasion of this third visit, there will be no gossip or rumors allowed to stand – every word or fact will be established in the word of two or three witnesses.

**What are the "two or three witnesses"?** **1)** Some believe Paul is referring to the legal strictness that would apply to the judicial investigation he or the assembled church (cf. Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:3-5) would conduct at Corinth: unsubstantiated accusations against Paul or any Corinthian would be ruled out of court. **2)** Others find a reference to Paul's three comings to Corinth (two actual, one promised) as three separate witnesses at whose testimony justice would certainly fall on the dissidents at Corinth on the imminent third visit. **3)** A third view sees in the "three witnesses" the threefold testimony or warning that Paul would not spare the Corinthians: (1) either 1 Corinthians 4:21 or the warning given on the second (= painful) visit; (2) the present warning in v.2b; and (3) either the third visit or Paul himself absent in Macedonia. **4)** A fourth interpretation is that the witnesses are not visits or warnings but people – i.e., Timothy, Titus, and Paul. Whichever view is preferred, the general import is clear: "Sufficient warning has been given; punishment is imminent."

**"Those who sinned earlier"** are the immoral persons of 12:21b who did not repent during Paul's "painful visit" and were evidently still indulging in their sexual sins. **"All the rest"** ("**any of the others,**" NIV) are probably those Corinthians who had been adversely influenced by the false apostles and were arrogantly fomenting unrest within the church (12:20b). Both groups here receive their final warning. If they remained unrepentant, he would be harsh in his use of authority (cf. v.10; 1 Cor. 4:21), perhaps handing the wrongdoers over to Satan "for the destruction of the flesh, leading to death, unless there was repentance (1 Cor. 5:5).

v. 3

It would seem that in their immaturity the Corinthian's were unimpressed by Christlike gentleness and meekness (10:1) but were overawed by arbitrary displays of power (11:20). In their misguided judgment, Paul's gentle demeanor, so unlike the temperament of the intruding false apostles, raised doubts about his claim to apostolic authority. They demanded that he give them some proof that

Christ in his resurrection power was speaking through him. His reply was that, though he had previously been "weak" in the Corinthian's estimation (10:1, 10), his impending severity would afford the proof they demanded that he was a spokesman of Christ – Christ, who was not weak in dealing with them but was powerful among them. As one commentator wrote, “. . . in challenging Paul to come and exert his authority, in defying him to come with a rod, in presuming on what they called his weakness, they were really challenging Christ.”

Rebellion against an appointed minister is rebellion against the higher power that appointed him. Thus, the rebellion of Korah against Moses was nothing less than rebellion against Jehovah himself. In the proof of his God-given authority by the punishment of any who remained unrepentant Paul might well have used the words of Moses: “Hereby ye shall know that Jehovah hath sent me to do all these works; for I have not done them of mine own mind” (Num.16:28). Just as the Lord gave proof through Moses that He was not weak, but powerful, in the punishment of Korah and his fellow-rebels, so also would any in Corinth who remained unrepentant have proof that Christ, through Paul, was not weak, but powerful, against them.

v. 4

The relationship between Christ and Paul with regard to weakness and power is now clarified. Jesus Christ was crucified "because of weakness." Even Christ, whose almighty power has been manifested in the transformation of lives in Corinth, was crucified through (out of the condition of) weakness. Death is the ultimate weakness. This weakness was not, of course, physical frailty or moral impotence, but rather the "weakness" of nonretaliation or nonaggressiveness before men and the "weakness" of obedience to God. Christ's "weakness" in assuming the poverty of earthly existence (8:9) and in humbling himself and becoming obedient even to the point of death on a cross (Phil 2:8), was, however, the most perfect evidence of strength. For Him who is the Prince of Life (Acts 3:15), death, and particularly death on a cross, is the lowest depth of humiliation. Yet, the cross, that supreme spectacle of weakness, is the focal point of the power and purpose of the omnipotent God for the rescuing of fallen man from his own utter powerlessness. But that "weakness" of Christ is past. Now he lives a resurrection life sustained by God's power, "the Spirit of holiness" (Rom 1:4). Even so, the person who is "weak" in man's estimation because he seeks to do God's will is in fact supremely strong.

As a result of being "in Christ", Paul shared in the weakness of his crucified Master. As a result of his fellowship with Christ, he shared in the mighty power of his risen Lord, a power imparted by God. It would be a mistake to understand Paul when he says "**we shall live with Him**" to refer to the end times and resurrection glory. In the context Paul is dealing with those to whom he brought life through the risen Christ, and their life in Christ is the proof of his apostleship.

Paul has already taught us that a time is coming when all shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ (5:10). Meanwhile the time between the Lord's two comings is the season of opportunity for all to avail themselves of the longsuffering of the Lord and to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). As one writer said, "The cross does not exhaust Christ's relationship to sin; He passed from the cross to the throne, and when He comes again it is as Judge. It is the sin of sins to presume upon the cross. . . . When Christ comes again He will not spare. The two things go together in Him: the infinite patience of the cross, the inexorable righteousness of the throne."

**A plea for self-examination -- 13:5-10.**

vv. 5-6

Rather than demanding proof that Christ was speaking through Paul (v.3), the Corinthians ought to be examining and testing themselves. If such examination shows that they have received the grace of God, that alone is irrefutable proof that it is none other than Christ who speaks in Paul since it was through his preaching that they received the gospel and passed from death to life. The repeated "yourselves" is in each case emphatic by position. Paul continues like this: "Don't you know yourselves sufficiently well to recognize that Christ Jesus lives within each of you (Col. 1:27; cf. Rom 8:9) and that therefore you are in the faith?" Although for the sake of emphasis he adds "unless, of course, you fail the test," he does not believe the Corinthians are counterfeit and knows that no Corinthian is likely to form such a conclusion about him.

As v.6 implies, the Corinthians' belief in the genuineness of their faith carried with it the proof of the genuineness of Paul's apostleship and gospel, for he had become their father in Christ Jesus through the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15). They themselves as men and women in Christ formed the verification of his credentials (cf. 3:2-3). Only if they doubted their own salvation should they doubt Paul's claim to be a true "apostle of Christ Jesus" (1:1). If they did not fail the test, neither did he (v.6).

v. 7

Again, as in 3:1; 5:12; 12:19, Paul anticipates and answers the objection that he had been commending or defending himself. His chief desire and his prayer to God were not for his vindication (though he was concerned about this, v.6), but for their avoidance of wrongdoing, both for the sake of their life in Christ and so that they would not need to see his severity (vv.2, 10). The wrong they might do would certainly include a refusal to repent of sin (12:20-21) and to repudiate the false teachers. It would be better that the Corinthians did what they knew to be good and right, even if this were to place Paul seemingly in the wrong, than that they should do something wrong. Paul did not expect to be shown up as counterfeit, but even such a price would be worth paying if it guaranteed that the Corinthians would do good. A similar sentiment is expressed in Romans 9:3.

As we have learned, if the Corinthians fail to examine themselves and cease from sin, Paul is not without other means of convincing them of the authenticity of his apostleship authority. To such he will come in power, not weakness. They will find him a stern judge, not a helpless bystander. But to give proof of his authority this way gives him no pleasure. A father does not delight in the chastisement of his children, even when for their own sakes it becomes a necessity. Hence, Paul's prayer is that they may abstain from all evil and conduct themselves in a manner that becomes Christ's followers.

vv. 8-9.

“For” indicates that this verse has a close connection with that which precedes it. The thought is this: Should Paul come to Corinth and find everything in order, then he will have no occasion for giving the threatened proof of his apostolic authority by stern measures, for there can be no power (in the sense of display of authority) against the truth, but only for (on behalf of) the truth. That is to say that a powerful demonstration of authority when the truth is established in a church would be a perversion of authority since such a display of power is justified only when serious error and misconduct are present and require to be driven out so that the cause of the truth may be vindicated.

It will be a matter of rejoicing to Paul, therefore, if the state of the church when he arrives in Corinth is such that he may be “weak,” (under no necessity to enforce authority) for this will mean that the Corinthians are “powerful,” not merely in the sense that they give evidence of spiritual power, but more precisely in the sense that they have disciplined themselves and thus precluded the necessity for him to come to them with a rod.

What Paul writes here throws light upon the office of elders. An elder must not be so timid as to shrink from openly imposing discipline when circumstances demand it. But at the same time he must always remember that, in contrast to the great ones of this world who exercise their authority as tyrannical and domineering overlords, it is not his part to be overbearing. He must not allow authority to degenerate into authoritarianism. He must never forget that, in conformity with the teaching and example of the Chief Shepherd, he who would be great must be the minister and servant of all (Mark 10:42ff).

v. 10

This verse brings to a conclusion the section of the epistle that began at 10:1. If 12:20-21 expresses Paul's fears about what he would find at Corinth on his arrival, 13:10 indicates his hope in this respect. He concludes by reminding them that if he writes with sharpness when he is absent it is with the purpose of negating the need for acting with sharpness when present. There is no renunciation of authority on his part, but his conduct is governed by the principle that (as he has previously stated in 10:8) his authority has been entrusted to him by the Lord to be used for constructive, not destructive ends. And so the Corinthians must understand that all that he does and says, whether absent or present, is for the building up of the church (12:19).

But even here a veiled warning is registered. While the Lord had not invested Paul with apostolic authority primarily for the negative work of tearing down, if destruction proved to be a necessary prelude to the positive task of construction, it would be reluctantly undertaken – and with the same authority (cf. 10:8). The decision now rests with them as to whether he is to come to them with a rod or in a spirit of meekness.

Was Paul's final visit to Corinth actually an unpleasant one? Though direct evidence is lacking, we have several indications that it was not unsuccessful. First, during the visit (which lasted three months according to Acts 20:2-3, probably in the winter of A.D. 56-57) he wrote the Epistle to the Romans. This letter seems to betray some apprehension for the future (Rom 15:30-31) but none for the present. Second, Paul would hardly have planned to visit Rome and then do pioneer evangelism in the west (Rom 15:24,28), if the church in the city he was writing from was in a state of disorder and disloyalty. Third, it is clear from Romans 15:26-27 that the Corinthians heeded

Paul's appeal in 2 Corinthians 8-9 and completed their collection for the saints at Jerusalem. Twice Paul notes that they "were pleased" to contribute, scarcely an appropriate description unless the church in Corinth was in harmony with the promoter of the collection. Fourth, the very preservation of 2 Corinthians (presumably at Corinth) argues in favor of the success of the visit promised in it.

### **Conclusion -- 13:11-13.**

v. 11

In closing the epistle Paul addresses the Corinthians affectionately as brethren and exhorts them with a succession of injunctions. The Greek word translated "farewell" may also be translated "rejoice," as in the margin of some translations and in the text of the English Standard Version. The latter rendering seems appropriate here, corresponding closely with the exhortation in Phil. 3:1 where the same word is used. (One of the weaknesses of the KJV is the penchant of the translators to use different English words to translate the same Greek word, e.g., hell and hades.) Christian joy is one of the fruits of the spirit (Gal. 5:22) and it should be a mark of every Christian community. The rejoicing, it should go without saying, is not mere high-spiritedness or the superficial affectation of a jovial attitude to life, but is the manifestation of a serene and heavenward-looking disposition, arising from a deep and exhaustless center of origin, because, as is apparent from Phil. 3:1 and 4:4, it is rejoicing in the Lord.

"Be perfected" (ASV) links with Paul's prayer for the Corinthians in v. 9, and it implies the need, not so much for individual sanctity as for a united, properly articulated, and therefore harmoniously functioning together of the members of Christ's body in Corinth.

"Be comforted" may be connected with what Paul has said in the beginning of the epistle (1:3ff.), where the same verb is used in this sense. Translators are split between "be comforted" and "be admonished" as proper renderings of the Greek. The word used is the same as that used of the Holy Spirit when Jesus promised to send a Comforter. The latter is preferred by some because it is more in keeping with Paul's context in which he has been admonishing the Corinthians relative to his apostolic authority. Others (*see, The Expositor's Greek Testament*) suggest that this verse is a summary of the book – (1) *rejoice* in the grace you have received (1:24; 2:3) even as I do on your behalf (7:7, 9, 16; 13:9); (2) *be perfected*, go on to perfection (6:1, 13; 7:1, 2; 9:8; 12:19; 13:9); (3) *be comforted*, the keynote of the early part of the Epistle (1:4, 6; 7:7); *be of the same mind, live in peace* (12:20).

If in the concluding promise Paul is stressing love and peace as characteristics of God (cf. Rom 5:8; 1 Cor. 14:33), the meaning will be: "[If you] aim for perfection. . . , then the God of love and peace will be with you." But if love and peace are here viewed as God's gifts ("the God who imparts love and peace"), Paul is indicating the divine resources that will enable the Corinthians to follow his injunctions.

vv. 12-13

The singleness of heart and purpose to which Paul has just exhorted the Corinthians may further be expressed or sealed by an external token of affection. The kiss or embrace enjoined is no mere social formality. It is “holy,” and that means Christlike and therefore absolutely sincere and pure. Like our handclasp today, it is a symbol of mutual confidence, and where the Corinthians are concerned, of the resolving of all their old division, their joyful reconciliation with each other in Christ, and their going forward together henceforth united in the fellowship and the labor of the gospel to the glory of God.

Evidently the early church invested the kiss, a common form of salutation in the Orient, with a special and sacred significance (cf. Rom 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14). It expressed union and fellowship within the one family of God, and perhaps also was a sign of mutual forgiveness and reconciliation that was exchanged before the Lord's Supper was celebrated (cf. Matt 5:23-24; 1 Cor. 16:20b-22).

Moreover, their unity at Corinth is but part of a still greater unity – the unity in Christ of God's people everywhere. Hence, Paul conveys to them from Macedonia the greetings of all the saints. Even though the majority of the Corinthian and Macedonian Christians had never met and were personally unknown to each other, yet they were united in Christ. They were members in one body under the one Head, and they will meet with all the saints of every age and clime when the unity of Christ and His people has its consummation in everlasting glory hereafter.

v. 14

Paul grounds his pastoral appeal for unity of spirit and for the rejection of discord (vv.11-12) in the theological doctrine of the Trinity. The grace of Christ banishes self-assertiveness and self-seeking, the love of God puts jealousy and anger to flight, while the fellowship created by the Spirit leaves no room for quarreling and factions (cf. 12:21). It is through the grace shown by Christ (8:9) in living and dying for men that God demonstrates his love (Rom 5 :8) and the Spirit creates fellowship (Eph 4:3).

“Finally, he finishes with a *blessing*. After the severity, the struggle and the debate, there comes the serenity of the benediction. One of the best ways of making peace with our enemies is to pray for them, for no one can hate a man and pray for him at the same time. And so we leave the troubled story of Paul and the Church of Corinth with the benediction ringing in our ears. The way has been hard, but the last word is peace.” William Barclay.