

2 Corinthians 13

This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me.

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you— unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.

Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection.

This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority— the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2Co 13:1-14 NIV)

Preach

We have come to the last of our series going through Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. His first letter deals exclusively with issues that have arisen within the church, but this second letter is much more concerned with issues that have arisen from without – that is the influence of false teachers.

These teachers have been teaching a false gospel of triumphalism, where every trouble is supposedly overcome by the supernatural activity of the Spirit. This has served to undermine Paul's authority, since he has himself clearly suffered innumerable troubles which have not been miraculously removed by the Spirit. Although Paul's ministry has consistently been attended with miraculous signs and healings, he has at the same time taught that Christ was crucified, and that we are to follow in His footsteps – always leading to ultimate triumph, yes, but often through great persecutions and difficulties.

Paul's defence of his apostolic ministry has been to make much of his sufferings and weaknesses alongside Christ's mighty power at work through his weakness. He has reminded them in many ways of the evidence of his Christ-given authority amongst them, even going so far as mentioning the amazing revelations he has had. Yet he will not budge from his position that the Christian life includes sufferings and troubles that we are sometimes not delivered from, and that we must find the grace of God to walk through. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

In this concluding chapter Paul returns to the matter of sin within the church. If nothing else persuades them of his Christ given authority, then his dealing with these issues when he comes to visit should seal the matter.

We see here one of the most difficult issues facing church leaders and those overseeing churches – that of dealing with sin within the congregation. Sometimes the issue relates to one or two people and can be dealt with privately but it is much more difficult when it affects the church more widely. And often even personal issues have wider ramifications.

Following his previous visit the leaders at Corinth had, under Paul's guidance, successfully dealt with bringing discipline to a man who had been involved in serious sexual misconduct and he had been restored to fellowship. But there were now a range of serious problems in the church which the leadership seemed unwilling to deal with.

Perhaps they had been persuaded by the false teachers that Paul was being far too harsh and that no action needed to be taken. Perhaps they were even condoning the behaviour of those that Paul said should be disciplined. Consequently Paul's authority as an apostle was being further challenged. And so Paul says, "On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me."

On the face of it this sounds like a control freak throwing his weight around, but if we read this carefully we see that it is not. For a start, Paul's genuine love for these people can hardly be questioned when one considers the sacrifices and sufferings he has been through on their behalf. His love and compassion shine through his letters. Secondly, he threatens

them, not with his own actions, but with those of Jesus Christ. This is the whole basis of his apostolic defence – that Christ speaks and acts through him.

If they demand proof of his apostolic authority amongst them, they will get it when he is amongst them and the power of Christ comes in judgement of their sin. This is not something Paul relishes one bit. The whole purpose of his letter has been to warn them off, to persuade them to return to faithfulness to Christ and so avert judgement.

Paul reminds them that although Jesus died in weakness upon the cross, He is now amongst them in power. The Corinthians have already known the power of Christ amongst them both in healing and other miraculous signs, but also in discipline and even sickness and death due to gross disobedience to the Spirit.

“For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.” (1 Cor 11)

This is not a subject often preached about, but the New Testament records a number of instances where sickness and death resulted from disregard for God. The writer to the Hebrews says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” And earlier in this letter Paul writes, “Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men”.

God disciplines those whom He loves so that we might enjoy the blessing of living righteous lives rather than in the misery of disobedience and unbelief. Sometimes if we harden our hearts against God speaking to us He uses other people to bring discipline to our lives. This is not a judgemental God threatening us if we don't make the mark, but the loving actions of our compassionate heavenly Father. Those in authority are often an instrument of God's discipline of His children.

Christian leaders have a particularly onerous God-given responsibility – the care of people's souls. They also have a responsibility to guard the flock and they will have to give an account to God for how they have done so.

Leading any church is a challenging and difficult task. Bringing leadership, direction and discipline to what is basically a voluntary organisation is always difficult. The task is made even more difficult when church members forget that the church belongs to Christ and think it belongs to them.

It is a sobering thought that we do well to consider: "How would we react if some upstart carpenter's son came in and started throwing his weight around, telling us that our church was missing the mark, and that what the Father really wanted was X Y and Z"?

Would we welcome such clear direction from God or would we resent the upset to our familiar routine?

Paul faced leadership issues, and he faced them unflinchingly. Godly church leadership is not about keeping people happy, it is not men-pleasing but God-pleasing.

When we lose sight of the fact that the church, *our church*, belongs to Christ and that His agenda is the only one that matters, Church leadership becomes exceedingly difficult; it becomes men-pleasing. Let us each search our hearts and do our best to ensure that Hilary, and others that lead amongst us, can fulfil their leadership role without constantly struggling against our own self-interests. It is up to us to give them the authority they need to lead us effectively.

Paul concludes on a more positive note. “Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace.”

He wants to turn their attention away from these arguments about apostolic prowess to the simple goals of discipleship and unity. “Aim for perfection.” Aim at Christlikeness; both in boldness of faith, but also in graceful endurance through difficulties.

Pauls concluding words are what we now know as “the grace”.

“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

It is a clear statement of the Trinitarian faith of the early church – the unity and distinctiveness of the Godhead; each member a person with special qualities. Jesus brings to us the grace of God – the extraordinary mercy and forgiveness of God through His death and resurrection. It is God’s love made present in our lives.

God the Father is the seat and source of that love. The Father’s love is so evident throughout the bible, yet it is constantly frustrated by the hard-heartedness of God’s chosen

people. God aches with love for us, but so often we resist Him because of our hard hearts.

It is the work and fellowship of the Holy Spirit that takes away that hardness of heart. He gives us a heart of flesh in exchange for our natural hearts of stone, so that we can say “Yes” to God and receive His grace and love. It is in our fellowship with the Holy Spirit that our hearts can be changed and faith is born and promises become precious to us.

In fellowship with Him we find courage to take risks and perseverance to press on. He ministers to us the grace and love of God so that we are lifted out of lives of ordinary human experience into the extraordinary life of a believer.

“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”