

Lessons on Second Corinthians

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Dedication

To our friends from the Becoming Closer class, for their constant encouragement and support.

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Personal Attack - 2 Corinthians 1:15 - 2:13

It is a rare thing to have a lesson on the art of dealing with personal attack. St. Paul gives us one in today's Scripture:

In this confidence I intended at first to come to you, so that you might twice receive a blessing; that is, to pass your way into Macedonia, and again from Macedonia to come to you, and by you to be helped on my journey to Judea. Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I? Or what I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, so that with me there will be yes, yes and no, no *at the same time*? But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us--by me and Silvanus and Timothy--was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us. Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave *us* the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge. But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I did not come again to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm. But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful? This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be *the joy* of you all. For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you. But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree--in order not to say too much--to all of you. Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which *was inflicted* by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort *him*, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm *your* love for him. For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. But one whom you forgive anything, I *forgive* also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, *I did it* for your sakes in the presence of Christ, so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes. Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.

(2Co 1:15-2:13 NASB)

Dealing with attack

One of the more distressing things a Christian must endure is the personal attack. This is particularly true if the attack comes from within the church, for there we expect to be loved unconditionally (and sometimes loved without discipline). Let's look at the attack that St. Paul was enduring:

Some Jews from Palestine, bearing letters of recommendation from other congregations, had come to Corinth and accused Paul of these things:

- ✚ that he was not an apostle at all, having shown no miraculous signs.
- ✚ that he wrote good letters, but was unimpressive and a poor speaker in person.
- ✚ that he was a coward, unreliable and said "yes and no" in the same breath.

✚ that he refused money from the Corinthian church, either because he was dishonest or because he wasn't sure he was an apostle.

✚ that he was egotistical and liked to parade it

In short, as an apostle, St. Paul was accused of being a failure. When we are accused, we sometimes leap too quickly to that conclusion: they wouldn't be accusing me if I weren't such a failure. It helps here to take the eternal view, of course - but even in the short term we can have some difficulty in making such a judgment. Consider:

Have you failed trying to accomplish something?

Imagine, how easy it would have been for this young man to have bowed his head and given up. He failed in business in '31, he was defeated for the legislature in '32, he was elected to the legislature in '34. His sweetheart died in '35, he had a nervous breakdown in '36, he was defeated for speaker in '38, he was defeated for elector in '40, he was defeated for Congress in '43, he was elected to Congress in '46, defeated for Congress in '48, defeated for Senate in '50, defeated for vice president in '56 and for Senate in '58. But fortunately he was elected president in 1860. His name was Abraham Lincoln. He proves that failure need not be permanent.

So, then, how does the Christian stand in the face of attack? I submit the following:

First, there is the virtue of hope. This life is not the sum of all things; the Lord is coming again. At that time He will judge - and reward - His faithful servants. Hold to this hope. He is coming, and when He does, He will know what you have done - even if no one else does.

Next, in this life itself - remember Mr. Lincoln? - faith is the great aid to the besieged. A conquering faith looks beyond today's accusation, knowing that God will turn this to the good of His people.

Paul's great defense here, however, is his conscience. It is clear, and he is therefore relieved of the charge of inconsistency. We overrate consistency by making it a virtue. Oswald Chambers warned us of it this way:

"Beware of making a fetish of consistency to your convictions instead of being devoted to God. I shall never do *that* - in all probability you will have to, if you are a saint. There was never a more inconsistent Being on this earth than our Lord, but He was never inconsistent to His Father. The one consistency of the saint is not to a principle, but to the Divine life. It is the Divine life which continually makes more and more discoveries about the Divine mind. It is easier to be a fanatic than a faithful soul, because there is something amazingly humbling, particularly to our religious conceit, in being loyal to God." (*My Utmost for His Highest*, italics added).

A good conscience, as in this passage, is the aid to true consistency - consistency to God. A clear conscience is a glory, said Thomas a Kempis:

"The glory of a good man is the witness of a good conscience. Preserve a quiet conscience, and you will always have joy. A quiet conscience can endure much, and remains joyful in all trouble, but an evil conscience is always fearful and uneasy. You may rest easy if your heart does not reproach you, and you are happy only when you have done right. The wicked never know true

happiness, nor do they enjoy inward peace, for 'There is no peace for the wicked,' says the Lord." (*The Imitation of Christ*)

That same devotion to God that gives Paul a good conscience moves him also to place the unity of the church above clearing his own good name. As in verse 23, see that he refused to visit them, "in order to spare you." His own reputation is below the good of his church, and his Lord. This is the key to dealing with the attacker.

Dealing with the attacker

There is always a temptation when attacked to duck. Avoiding conflict often seems preferable to engaging in it. There is no real justification for avoiding conflict; there is every justification for avoiding a quarrelsome attitude. When confronted with conflict, the object should be to resolve the conflict - using the weapons of the Christian - rather than avoiding it. Go to the dentist when the pain is small.

Paul shows this in the letter he alludes to. It evidently was quite stern. Lately we have seen the rise of the phrase "tough love." There is much to that - if we remember that it must be love first to be tough.

What, then, are the methods of the Christian in dealing with his attacker? I suggest the following:

- ✚ *Courtesy.* It is surprising how often the clashing of the gears can be quieted with a little oil. Courtesy reaffirms at each step that you see your attacker as a child of God also, worthy therefore of your respect.
- ✚ *Rebuke in love.* As Paul does here, we should state our case in love, not in anger. If for no other reason than our own self control, rebuke in love. More than that, however, consider your brother as yourself - just how do you want to be rebuked?
- ✚ *Rebuke without domination.* Remember that the object of Christian discipline - and such must be applied to an unwarranted personal attack - is reconciliation. The authority belongs to the Lord, not to us. Do not steal what belongs to God.

Finally, remember that your desire to "get even" must give way to the good of the church. See Paul's example here. His command to the Corinthians gives three steps:

- ✚ Forgiveness of the offender
- ✚ Healing (reconciliation) to the offender
- ✚ Unity in the church.

Which leads us, naturally, to how the church as a whole must deal with one who attacks another.

Dealing with attacks - as the church

Particularly in dealing with attacks within the church, it is essential to hold fast to our hope. We are the body of Christ; the Spirit is within us. Sometimes we wonder if we will "get it right." Remember that the guidance of the Spirit is assured to us. We may wander but we will never be permanently lost

(the indefectibility of the Church - the Spirit will not long allow us to remain in error.) We need to listen and learn:

It is said that a certain guide lived in the deserts of Arabia who never lost his way. He carried with him a homing pigeon with a very fine cord attached to one of its legs. When in doubt as to which path to take, he threw the bird into the air. The pigeon quickly strained at the cord to fly in the direction of home, and thus led the guide accurately to his goal. Because of this unique practice he was known as "the dove man." So, too, the Holy Spirit, the heavenly Dove, is willing and able to direct us in the narrow way that leads to the more abundant life if in humble self-denial we submit to His unerring supervision.

Conflict in the church is a great source of anguish - and doubt. We need to remember whose Spirit is within us. This carries with it certain results:

- ✚ *The flaws of the messenger do not mar the flawlessness of the message.* I teach that all men are sinners, and are in need of the reconciliation of the Cross. Because I am a sinner too, does that mean my message is false? No indeed! I serve as yet another example that "all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God."
- ✚ *Reliability is in God, not men.* I may make the promises of God; doing so in His word and teaching - but He will deliver. I can only try to deliver what I am able to deliver. What a great relief for the teacher, and what a great confidence for the student.
- ✚ *The Holy Spirit is our guarantee of this.* The word in the Greek (translated "seal of ownership" in verse 22) is *arrabon*, and it roughly corresponds to a down payment in our modern terms. The contract is completed (the covenant) and the payment has begun.
- ✚ *Ultimately, Jesus is the "yes"; we are the "Amen".* The character of the messenger, the corruption of the message - none of this ultimately matters because of Jesus. We are not the makers of salvation; we are merely those who agree it has been made.

As the church, we must look not only to resolving conflicts among us, but we must also do so while guarding against the attack from without. Make no mistake: Satan is real, and Satan is on the prowl. Any act of "conflict resolution" must take this into account, for Satan will use the process of reconciliation - to warp it and turn it around. The most common way is to allow discipline to degenerate into pure punishment - thus driving the repentant sinner into the arms of Satan. Our arms should be around their shoulders with a hug, not holding a stick to beat them off.

Reconciliation is the aim of the church. We must reconcile those who, like Paul's attackers, would divide the church. Discipline means to make disciples, not merely to thrash. Indeed, the aim of the church is to reconcile *all* men to God. When we are attacked, the enemy has given us a golden opportunity to do just that.

Spirit in our Lives - 2 Corinthians 2:14 - 3:17

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? (2Co 2:14-16 NASB)

When I was in college I spent quite some time reading *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by William Shirer. I was fascinated with the way Hitler came to power, his ability to move so many to such fanaticism. Being interested in the subject, I once watched a documentary presentation of one of his propaganda films, made before the war. It was a "news film" about a party rally at Nuremberg. It was indeed a powerful series of images, glowing with the idea that the Fuhrer was indeed the savior of Germany, and that here again was the pride in the Fatherland sought by so many. Despicable though its cause was, it was propaganda of so high an order as to be called art.

Paul takes the opening of today's Scriptures from a similar procession. The phrase used describes a Roman triumph: the highest honor awarded to a general. To obtain a true Roman triumph, certain conditions had to be met:

- ✚ The general must have been the actual commander in the field
- ✚ The campaign must be completely finished and the troops home
- ✚ At least 5,000 enemy must have perished in one battle
- ✚ New territory must have been added, not just retained
- ✚ Victory must be over a foreign foe, not a civil war.

If these conditions were met, a great parade was held. The procession came out in this order:

- ✚ State officials and the senate
- ✚ Trumpeters
- ✚ Spoils of war
- ✚ Scenes from the captured land
- ✚ White bull for sacrifice
- ✚ Prisoners to be executed (enemy leaders)
- ✚ Musicians and lictors
- ✚ Priests swinging incense filled censers
- ✚ The general, in a four horse chariot. He was clothed in a purple tunic with golden palm leaves; covered by a purple toga marked out with golden stars. He held an ivory scepter with the Roman eagle; a slave stood behind him holding the "crown of Jupiter" over his head.
- ✚ The general's family
- ✚ The general's army

Interestingly enough, Paul uses this image and calls us the "aroma of Christ." Psychologists tell us that aromas are often associated with our strongest, most emotional memories. You can imagine what that incense smelled like. To the family and the troops (to us and the angels?) it was the sweet smell of victory. To the prisoners, the smell of impending death. Just by being around, we remind the foes of Christ of their fate. We are the light of the world.

Such a thought always produces in me the thought that I am not able to be such. How could I be? Or as Paul puts it here, "Who is equal to such a task?" Only those to whom the Spirit gives life and power.

The Letters of our Lives

For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ toward God.

(2Co 2:17-3:4 NASB)

Even at this early stage of the church, we see the "preacher for profit." Our Lord told us that this would be so. He described them as "ferocious wolves" (see Matthew 7:15-20). How are we to tell them from the real servants of God? Paul gives us the answer here, echoing Jesus thought. Paul's fruits are the Corinthians themselves! He describes them, as in the context of his argument about "letters of recommendation", as his own letters of recommendation. Written on their hearts is the letter of those who formed us. Three questions:

- 1) What kind of letter are my students for me?
- 2) What kind of letter are your children for you?
- 3) What kind of letter is our church to the community?

My sister-in-law says she can see my father in me. I can see me in my son Doug. When he was a baby, people said things like, "Oh, he's your kid. I can tell by the [ears, chin, eyes, etc.]" Now that Doug is grown, people see my character in him [as he has grown to be much better looking.]

In the New Testament there is a continuing contrast between Law and Spirit. In our families, Law is what we *tell* our children; Spirit is what we *give* our children.

The Law and the Spirit

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading *as* it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses *it*. For if that which fades away *was* with glory, much more that which remains *is* in glory. Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in *our* speech, and *are* not like Moses, *who* used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

(2Co 3:5-16 NASB)

The Spirit within us is writing His letter to the world in our characters. In verses 5 and 6, we see one of the key characteristics of how the Spirit does that: strength through weakness. No one could possibly be worthy of the calling Paul had, but the Spirit makes him able to perform it. My own strength can stand in the way of the Spirit giving me far greater strength! As Paul wrote earlier to the Corinthians,

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

(1Co 1:25 NASB)

Paul - as any orthodox Jew of the time would - does not deny the truth of the Law. Instead, throughout his writings, there are two ideas which are prevalent:

1) The Law is our schoolmaster (see Galatians 3:24 in the King James - "put in charge" in the NIV). It is profitable for us to read it, for in it we learn how God dealt with ancient Israel - and there are many lessons to be heeded from this.

2) But the Law is also a veil. In our time, this can mean not only the Law of Moses, but also the self made law - the rules and regulations made up by men as a substitute for the righteousness of Christ. The good news is that when a man turns to Christ, Christ tears away the veil - as he tore the veil of the Holy of Holies at His death. He will tear away the veil of legalism and let you look into the face of God - if you will turn to Him.

Indeed, the Law can now hold us back from being what God intended us to be. We are created in the image of God, and are meant to be free; we are held in the bondage of sin, until Christ sets us free. But what is freedom?

Freedom in Christ

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

(2Co 3:17-18 NASB)

What is freedom? I submit that freedom is not license, nor is it ever absolute. It is the ability to be what you were designed to be - without limits. An eagle in a mole's tunnel is not free, no matter what you tell him. There is no use dropping the mole from an airplane and telling him to flap his arms. Both animals would be terrified; in a very real sense both are bound - the eagle confined in the tunnel; the mole wanting to get back into it.

We are designed to be like God. As we grow in Christ, we are being transformed to be like Him. Just as my son grew from a physical resemblance of his father to a spiritual resemblance, so we as Christians are growing in His likeness. And there is the test: do others see the likeness of Christ in you?

Loyalty - 2 Corinthians 4

Loyalty is a word that seems little used today. The cynic is ever with us, and loyalty seems an easy target. The Christian is commanded to be loyal to the person named Jesus, the Christ.

For most of us, loyalty to a cause is much easier than loyalty to a person. We are loyal in varying degrees - we are fans of a sports team, to being fanatics (the root word is the same) for a cause such as communism, socialism or spelling reform. Why do we have such loyalty to a cause, and renounce loyalty to a person (such as our wives?) I submit these reasons:

- ✚ A cause, being abstract, never has human failings. Therefore, it never disappoints us. A cause is never shamed by its betrayers; a man is reflected by them.
- ✚ A cause often satisfies the deep longing of man to "solve the problem." For the same reason we like detective stories, we look for the neat and plausible answer. Neat, plausible, and wrong. When true communism comes, we will all eat strawberries and cream.
- ✚ Being part of a cause gives a sense of approval. We are the enlightened, crusading against the evil ones. One of my coworkers has posters of noted ecologists on her cubicle, titled "Saviors of the Planet." We have both the congeniality of the group and the pride of being righteous.

Loyalty to a cause is an adult phenomenon. Have you ever seen a child loyal to a cause? They don't know how; they only know loyalty to a person. They don't know the answers; they know the Answerer. Oswald Chambers put it this way:

"Spiritual life is the life of a child. We are not uncertain of God, but uncertain of what He is going to do next. If we are only certain of our beliefs, we get dignified and severe and have the ban of finality about our views; but when we are rightly related to God, life is full of spontaneous, joyful uncertainty and expectancy."

Paul begins our passage this morning on this note.

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

(2Co 4:1-6 NASB)

Loyalty to the person - Jesus Christ

Paul, in this passage, gives us the secret of loyalty to Jesus Christ. He does not preach himself, but preaches Jesus. Notice how he maintains that loyalty:

Renouncing secret sin. C.S. Lewis, in his classic *Screwtape Letters*, describes one particularly common form of secret sin. He describes, from the demon's point of view, a man living a dual life:

"... He can be taught to enjoy kneeling beside the grocer on Sunday *just because* he remembers that the grocer could not possibly understand the urbane and mocking world which he inhabited on Saturday evening; and contrariwise, to enjoy the bawdy and blasphemy over the coffee with these admirable friends all the more because he is aware of a "deeper", "spiritual" world within him which they cannot understand. You see the idea - the worldly friends touch him on one side and the grocer on the other, and he is the complete, balanced, complex man who sees round them all. Thus, while being permanently treacherous to at least two sets of people, he will feel, instead of shame, a continual undercurrent of self-satisfaction."

The Saturday sinner/Sunday saint is ever with us.

We need not go that far. We can conduct secret sin just by being quiet. One of the class tells the horror story of the Sunday School teacher who called for prayer requests - and got "please pray for me and my wife - we're getting a divorce" from a supposedly solid couple. Is this loyalty to Christ?

Not using deception. One of the great temptations is to do a wrong thing for a righteous cause. One of my pet peeves is the "preacher's story" told in the first person. The number of preachers who have that brother-in-law who solved that problem with Joshua's long day is legendary...

Another form of this is the "pet Scripture." The worst sin, of course, is the one I am never tempted to commit - but always seem to recognize in others. This works best with a short verse taken out of context - or even simply misquoted - as blanket condemnation. Since such a verse won't stand up in public - we hide it in our hearts, and thus judge our brothers unseen.

Plain preaching. Some people don't like this. After all, I might offend someone ["I came not to bring peace but rather a sword."] But note that the appeal is not to the sensibility or to the affections but rather to the conscience.

There is an aspect of "money where the mouth is" to this. By plain preaching, I make it clear where I stand. In addition, by public preaching I invite public examination of my life. This, of course, will eventually fail - if I preach my own virtue. I invite comparison to whomever I preach. And I preach the man without compare.

One of those preacher stories: attributed to Billy Graham and D.L. Moody. The great evangelist meets a drunk - who promptly recognizes him and hails him as "the man who saved me." The preacher replies something like, "you look like someone I'd save - now let Jesus save you."

Servant of others. It's hard to argue with a man while he's doing you a favor. By being the servant of others, Paul sets up an example which points to his Lord. He begs you to ask the question, "why is this man doing this?" The answer is his loyalty to his Lord.

Combat Christianity

Such a life is not without its little problems, says Paul:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but

not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you.

(2Co 4:7-12 NASB)

We see at the beginning one of the great principles of God's strength - and one of the prime movers for loyalty. God's strength is shown in our weakness - his treasure in our jars of clay. By letting God's power flow through us, we show the world who our Lord truly is.

The trouble with that is that it hurts. When we are hard pressed, we don't enjoy it. But as Winston Churchill once said of 1940, "These are not dark days. They are stern days, but they are not dark days." He viewed the situation not as desperate, but one in which Great Britain "had the honor to be the champion in arms of freedom." Sometimes we can't tell a good day from a bad.

Look at Paul's comparisons:

We are *pressed* - from the outside
but not *crushed* - because the inside is full of the Spirit.

We are *perplexed* - the outside world won't tell us the future
but not in *despair* - still having holy hope on the inside

We are *persecuted* - by the outside world
but not *abandoned* - by God.

Paul puts the point even to using death as an example. See it as a sequence:

Christ died, that I might live

I am dying, that you might live

...and you?

We need to die to ourselves to pass the faith along. One of the consistent pictures of the Scripture is that something must die to be reborn in new life. We pass the faith along in times of trial much more easily than in times of ease - for it is much easier to see it then. We become the seeds of the next generation of faith - and the seeds must be planted ("die") to blossom in new life.

Faith cannot be held. It can flow through us, and be a clean running river of life, but when stopped up it becomes a stagnant pool. If we are not willing to be poured out as an offering before the Lord, we will turn sour in the bottle. "To live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Testimony - the outward loyalty

Paul now works out what has been worked in:

But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE," we also believe, therefore we also speak, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. For all things *are* for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

(2Co 4:13-18 NASB)

Testimony is one of the things most of us avoid - especially in a public speaking environment. Where do we gather the courage to testify for God? Paul gives us a hint here by quoting the Old Testament. Here's the Psalm in full:

I love the LORD, because He hears My voice *and* my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me, Therefore I shall call *upon Him* as long as I live. The cords of death encompassed me And the terrors of Sheol came upon me; I found distress and sorrow. Then I called upon the name of the LORD: "O LORD, I beseech You, save my life!" Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; Yes, our God is compassionate. The LORD preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me. Return to your rest, O my soul, For the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. For You have rescued my soul from death, My eyes from tears, My feet from stumbling. I shall walk before the LORD In the land of the living. I believed when I said, "I am greatly afflicted." I said in my alarm, "All men are liars." What shall I render to the LORD For all His benefits toward me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation And call upon the name of the LORD. I shall pay my vows to the LORD, Oh *may it be* in the presence of all His people. Precious in the sight of the LORD Is the death of His godly ones. O LORD, surely I am Your servant, I am Your servant, the son of Your handmaid, You have loosed my bonds. To You I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, And call upon the name of the LORD. I shall pay my vows to the LORD, Oh *may it be* in the presence of all His people, In the courts of the LORD'S house, In the midst of you, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!

(Psa 116:1-19 NASB)

The Psalmist gives us three methods of public testimony - the evidence of our loyalty to God. They are

- ✚ speaking to others. Do we tell others of the goodness of God in our lives?
- ✚ fulfilling our vows. Do you keep your word, even when it's costly? ("If a man's principles don't cost him anything, they aren't worth much.")
- ✚ offerings of thanksgiving. Not saying "thank you" - but putting our money where our mouths are. If a man gives money to a cause, you conclude he really believes in it. How much more for Christ?

And what gave Paul the courage to do such things? By the power of God! Just how many resurrections do you need to discover who has the power over the grave? And what greater power is there? All our sciences have produced great power - but there is no cure for death. No cure - but one.

Therefore - Paul prepares us for the conclusion. *We do not lose heart*. Can we really say that? We can! I call it the "Indiana Jones" principle. If you had to live a life like that, you would be panic stricken all the time; it would be terrible just to watch it. Yet we pay to see it in the movies. Why the contrast? *Because we know the hero wins in the last reel.*

It's the same with us. We ride the roller coaster of the freeways of life - and panic. Then we go to the amusement park - and ride the roller coaster for fun. We know the answer; we know who wins.

That produces in us (or should) great inward strength. Strength, like its feminine equivalent beauty, comes from the inside. If we focus on the eternal, and pass through the temporal. we can be very strong in Christ.

It's called hope. C.S. Lewis expressed it this way: "Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither."

There it is: the high, hard calling of God. Not to the drudgery of ordinary life, not to the greatest of causes, but to the highest itself: Jesus Christ, the name above all names.. Loyalty to Him is the road that leads to Heaven - whatever the bumps along the way.

Christ's Ambassador - 2 Corinthians 5

Millions of Americans this summer will be ill-housed, scantily clothed and poorly fed. They will struggle with infestations of disease carrying insects. They will attempt to cook outdoors, using equipment not much different than their grandfathers used. They will not sleep in a bed, but on the ground itself. Air conditioning will mean to them to let the breeze come through. They will do this in crowded conditions, sharing toilet facilities in a public park. Water often comes only from a public faucet.

They call it camping.

Isn't it strange that so hard an existence is so popular with us? What we would not tolerate as a standard of living we will cheerfully embrace - for a little while. We need to look at our Christian life in the same way - the world is not our home, we're just passing through. Paul begins our lesson Scripture today in this manner:

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this *house* we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord-- for we walk by faith, not by sight-- we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

(2Co 5:1-10 NASB)

The Last Day

The Christian views his earthly body like a tent: a temporary dwelling, a place of hardship voluntarily shouldered. There are three primary views of the human body:

The Greek/Roman View: This view holds that at death the spirit and the body part company, permanently. One "gives up the ghost" - and *ghost* is just the older English word for *spirit*. It is from this view that we get most of our classic ghost stories. Christians often take this view, transmuting it into the idea that when we die, we go to heaven as disembodied spirits to live with Jesus. Permanently. There is no support for this view in the Scripture.

The modern view. This view denies the existence of "spirit" in any sense but the alcoholic. The body is a machine, and as such death means the machine has broken down. Ghosts don't exist, because they can't exist.

Interestingly, however, we see an increase in the "scientific investigation" of ghosts - now renamed with such things as parapsychology. Satan is working to convince man that man is a machine, but there are "life forces" (not spirits, of course). C.S. Lewis identified the ultimate goal of this strategy as the "materialist magician."

The Christian View. The Christian view sees the body as the temporary dwelling place of the spirit - until it is renewed. The resurrection of the body is taught in the church from the time of the Apostles. This explains some interesting writing in the New Testament.

The "suicide" passages - what appears to be a longing for death, for release from the pains of life, is in fact a desire for a much better thing. It's not a desire to "end it all" - rather, it's a desire to go from this mortal body to the glorious one promised.

The purpose of God - see verse 5 - is just that. One of the reasons that God has sent Jesus is that we may eventually (but certainly) rise in such a body, to be sons and daughters of the Most High.

Make no mistake of it: the resurrection of the body is clearly taught. Along with it is taught the judgment to come. For those who are Christians, this will be a time of reward for the sacrifices made for Jesus Christ. It is the time when all things will "come out even." For those who did not see justice in their lives, justice will arrive at the Resurrection and Judgment.

What kind of body will this be? We have little evidence about it other than the accounts of Jesus after the Resurrection. Paul here simply compares it to being naked and loaded down in this body; clothed and free in the next.

How do we know this in our own lives? The seal of the Spirit. It is interesting to note that the Spirit is the person of the Trinity which is portrayed as giving life. The work of the Spirit in our lives is our guarantee.

The "tent" of this body reminds us that we are pilgrims. We are travelers on the caravan of life, pitching our mortal tents each night one day's march closer to home. We so often make the mistake of attempting to build up our campsite into a mansion, when our Lord has one planned for us. Our tent is a fragile thing - ever had one blow over in a storm? - and we must carry it yet a few more days.

Motivation

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences. We are not again commending ourselves to you but *are* giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have *an answer* for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him in this way* no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Co 5:11-17 NASB)

If there is one topic sure to cause backpedaling, dancing and finger crossing among Sunday School teachers, it is the "fear of the Lord." We have spent so much time teaching "Jesus, gentle Jesus" that we have forgotten that gentleness is born of strength, not of weakness. We do not wish to teach "the fear of the Lord." Yet, says Scripture, it is the beginning of wisdom.

Dwight Eisenhower tells a story which illustrates this fear, and its use as motivation, very well. When he was a young lad, his father had forbidden him to fight with other boys (I've done likewise with mine). So one day his father was surprised to find young Dwight being chased around his own yard by another boy. Dad yelled out to Ike and asked why he let that other boy chase him around. Ike reminded his dad that he was forbidden to fight - and that he'd far rather get a whipping from the other boy than from his dad.

"Chase that boy out of the yard!" his father commanded.

Ike's reaction: "that was enough for me!" He promptly put the other boy to flight.

Fear God, dread naught. Sometimes we refuse to speak to others because we are afraid they may be offended; we will be upset by their reaction. God's not offended that we do not reach out to the lost? Fear God, dread naught.

The world will think this foolishness, of course. So Paul can say that we are fools for Christ. But as the old song reminds us, everybody's somebody's fool. Have you seen what a young man in love will do?

There is a difference between compulsion by love and compulsion by circumstance. Compulsion by circumstance leaves no choices; compulsion by love means obedience among the choices.

This leads us to the Christian point of view: how do we see others, in general? Are they potential rivals? Are they enemies? Are they potential victims? Are they just customers? Or are they men and women for whom Christ died, capable of becoming joint heirs of the kingdom, rising in the resurrection body? Point of view can be everything. Paul asks us to see ourselves as ambassadors for Christ:

Ambassadors

Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

(2Co 5:18-21 NASB)

Now Paul brings all our thoughts together. We are just passing through, living in the tent of this body, in the world but not of the world, on our way home. Meanwhile, however, we are the ambassadors of Christ. Let's think about being an ambassador:

An ambassador is a citizen of his home country, but lives in a foreign land. Indeed, like the Israelites, we are aliens. We must speak the language of the country in which we reside, but also the language of heaven. (Wise as serpents, harmless as doves).

An ambassador is the voice of his home country. He is appointed to speak for his home nation. The message he brings is not of his own doing, but that of his country. Do we speak for the kingdom of heaven?

A country is often judged by its ambassador. If the ambassador is rude and impolite, the natives judge that his country must be full of such people, if this is the best they could send.

The Roman ambassador had another function than these. The word used can mean an ambassador in the sense that we use it today; it can also mean something slightly different. Think about western Europe after the Second World War. American ambassadors were called upon to implement the Marshall Plan, which greatly helped to bring about the economic recovery of that area. In Roman times, an ambassador (same word) was appointed to areas which had been newly conquered, and was charged with the responsibility of bringing that area fully into the Roman Empire.

We are such ambassadors. Paul calls us the "ministers of reconciliation." We are the ones who are to bring others into the kingdom of God.

The work has been done. God became man, that men might become like God. Our ambassadors in Europe did not produce the goods we shipped there; rather, they were the ones who represented us there. So we must represent our Lord in this fallen and self destructive world.

Separation - 2 Corinthians 6:1 - 7:4

A Preliminary - On Logic.

It is a characteristic of modern debate that we proceed in the deductive manner. You may remember your high school geometry: start with the general rules, and proceed to the individual consequences. Our current debate on health care goes something like this:

"Everybody should be able to have basic health care"

"Not everybody does."

"Therefore, we need my new national health care system." (QED)

There is another method. In mathematics it is called induction; it starts with the instance and proceeds to the general. Paul will use this method in his statements today. He will start with his own personal example; go from there to the principle - and thence to the application.

The Example - Paul's conduct.

And working together *with Him*, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain-- for He says, "AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU." Behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION"-- giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; *regarded* as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

(2Co 6:1-10 NASB)

In this passage, Paul contrasts what might be called the "world view" with the "kingdom view." In the world view, Paul would put a stumbling block in front of people - so that he himself would not be inconvenienced. It's the "last man on the blimp" principle - I'm aboard, why shouldn't I pull up the ladder and avoid the extra weight?

Paul takes the opposite road. He would rather suffer than see his followers fall. His suffering is very broad:

- ✚ *Emotional suffering*- endurance, troubles, hardship and distress. The word for distress here is interesting: *stenochoria*, it means "to be in a tight place." It was said of a ship, or of an army caught in a canyon. Have you ever felt like you had no options but the bad ones?
- ✚ *Societal suffering*- beating, imprisonment, riots. Paul has seen them all - by now he is an experienced campaigner. He's a living example of Tertullian's epigram: "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church."
- ✚ *Physical suffering*- hard work, sleepless nights and hunger. The word for hard work is the Greek *kepos*, which means "to toil to exhaustion." Sleepless nights may have been in prayer ["momma used to burn the midnight oil down on her knees in prayer."]

✚ *Spiritual suffering* - Paul put himself through the disciplines of purity, of understanding, patience and kindness. Purity - the Greeks defined it as "prudence at its highest tension." Understanding here means knowing what to do in a practical sense - studying what must be done and doing it. Patience in the Greek original applies to patience with people. Kindness, of course, does also.

This suffering yields positive action on Paul's part. Before action comes the preparation:

- ✚ - preparation in the Holy Spirit, the Christian's comforter.
- ✚ - sincere love (checked your motives lately?) How do I know I taught a "great lesson?" When you say "I'm going to go out and do that!"
- ✚ - truthful speech (no preacher's stories)
- ✚ - the power of God (just whose kingdom is this anyway?)
- ✚ - the weapons of righteousness - both defensive and offensive (see Ephesians)

And so it goes. The result is a series of contrasts - the world's view (Paul the imposter) versus God's view (Paul the genuine article). The word for imposter is interesting: it means a *quack*. Perhaps the most interesting contrast is *poor* versus *making many rich*. The picture from the world is that of the beggar. The view from the kingdom is that of a man who is so wealthy that he makes other people millionaires - by gift.

Just what makes a man rich anyway?

Conclusion: Paul looks very different from the kingdom view. Does this surprise you? It shouldn't:

"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign the members of his household! Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

(Mat 10:24-26 NASB)

So Paul now comes to the principle of which is such a superb example. But before he does, he pleads with the Corinthians to listen to him with an "open heart."

Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange--I speak as to children--open wide *to us* also.

(2Co 6:11-13 NASB)

Perhaps he has something important to say. Indeed, it is the principle of the lesson.

The Principle: Separation

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you. "And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me," Says the Lord Almighty.

(2Co 6:14-18 NASB)

The expression "yoked" comes from an Old Testament example, well known to any Jew:

"You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.
(Deu 22:10 NASB)

This is one of the many regulations that Jehovah gave the ancient Israelites that seem to have no particular purpose other than to teach them that they are separate from the rest of the people around them. I've heard it argued that "old farmers knew that this wouldn't work; it's just practical advice, that's all." If they all knew it, why did God give them such a regulation? Is it really a temptation? No, it will work just fine - unless you have been called out to be separate.

Paul starts with an obvious example: what fellowship do righteousness and wickedness have together. He then uses a common - but high - example: light and darkness.

for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light *consists* in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them;
(Eph 5:8-11 NASB)

Note that this is not so much a command as a statement. If you are children of the light, you will be separate, and you will expose the deeds of darkness merely by being around. Ever notice how the cockroaches scurry from the light?

Next comes Christ and Belial (an obscure reference to Satan). We sometimes think we must have something in common. After all, haven't we all been in a place where we have to compromise? I like Tertullian's example here. Someone once came to him, explaining how he could not follow Christ in some particular matter, ending his argument with, "after all, I have to live." "Must you?"

This usually comes to head in the form of another person: believer and unbeliever. We wind up giving up something to remain loyal to Christ, and the something is often the aid and friendship - or profit by - another person. But, as my father taught me, "If a man's principles don't cost him anything, they aren't worth much."

Finally, Paul takes the issue to the symbol most Jews would closely identify with holiness: the temple. Perhaps he is thinking back to Manasseh:

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Hephzibah. He did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. He built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem I will put My name." For he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. He made his son pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD provoking *Him to anger*. Then he set the carved image of Asherah that he had made, in the house of which the LORD said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever. "And I will not make the feet of Israel wander anymore from the land which I gave their fathers, if only they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the

law that My servant Moses commanded them." But they did not listen, and Manasseh seduced them to do evil more than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the sons of Israel.
(2Ki 21:1-9 NASB)

Here we see the greatest sin against separation: bringing the idol into the church. No doubt Manasseh thought he was being so wise. You can almost hear the reasoning: "We'll unite the religions of the people, one common believe, mutual tolerance, no more religious strife..." Do you see what that does? It makes God the servant of (in this instance) "unity, tolerance..." The church becomes merely a tool for another cause. C.S. Lewis parodied this (in Screwtape) as "Christianity and Spelling Reform."

The root of separation must be seen here. Paul is referencing the Old Testament again:

'I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.
(Lev 26:12 NASB)

There are three principles of separation shown in our passage:

- come out from them. Spiritually remove yourself from the danger of the contamination of unbelievers. (Playboy has done more damage in philosophy spreading than in centerfold spreads.)

- touch nothing unclean. Sometimes we don't think about where we are going or what we are touching (example: the company will never miss that!) This is taken from Isaiah:

Depart, depart, go out from there, Touch nothing unclean; Go out of the midst of her, purify yourselves, You who carry the vessels of the LORD.
(Isa 52:11 NASB)

- know whose child you are - accept the fatherhood of God. Act like one of the family.

The Application

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. Make room for us *in your hearts*; we wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one. I do not speak to condemn you, for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together. Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction.

(2Co 7:1-4 NASB)

It is not sufficient to separate yourself. Remember the principal of the "spiritual vacuum."

"When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' "And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. "Then it goes and takes *along* seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first."
(Luk 11:24-26 NASB)

Paul here begins with the purification of the body. Why? Because we are amphibians. We inhabit both the physical and spiritual worlds. What we do in one affects the other. So if the body is not pure (which generally references such little things as adultery) then the spiritual life will not be pure.

Next comes purification in the spirit. Paul explains this in an interesting phrase: "perfecting holiness..." It's as if God has given us the Corvette - but we are expected to polish it, showing how much

we value it. If I give my kid a Corvette, he'd better polish it - out of fear of the old man, if nothing else.
So should I perfect my holiness in reverence of the Lord.

Rebuke and Repentance - 2 Corinthians 7:5-16

Paul now relates his experience with a stern letter to the Corinthians. He followed that letter by sending Titus to the Corinthians, and we see the story of that letter and its results in this passage:

For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more. For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it--*for* I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while-- I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to *the point of* repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to *the will of* God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to *the will of* God produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, *it was* not for the sake of the offender nor for the sake of the one offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God. For this reason we have been comforted. And besides our comfort, we rejoiced even much more for the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. For if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame; but as we spoke all things to you in truth, so also our boasting before Titus proved to be *the* truth. His affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you.

(2Co 7:5-16 NASB)

Paul is often pictured as a rather crusty, somewhat antagonistic fellow. Perhaps there is some justice to this, but this passage presents rather a different picture. It is a past tense history of Paul's rebuke to the Corinthians. It's interesting to think how such a rebuke might be greeted today, in the era of "do your own thing," but in Paul's time we see some of the principles which might serve as example to our generation.

The Art of Rebuke

Rebuke is often necessary. There is no sense in putting off or softening a rebuke. You will only get greater trouble later. My dentist knows this, and no matter how much I'd love to hear, "we can fix that tooth next time" he never says it. The same is true of rebuke of sin:

'You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him.

(Lev 19:17 NASB)

You see the point. If you really love someone, you will rebuke their sin frankly out of love for them. More to the point, if you don't, you share the guilt. Silence is consent.

Rebuke is not a pleasure, but a duty. Nothing quite feels so good as the thought that I (myself, personally) am the embodiment of righteousness, delivering just rebuke to you. Nothing is quite so disastrous to Christian life. Paul gave instruction to Timothy on this point, concerning older men rebuked by the young Timothy:

Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father, *to* the younger men as brothers,

(1Ti 5:1 NASB)

Rebuke is to be taken as a good thing. If delivered out of love, rebuke is to be taken as a blessing: Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; It is oil upon the head; Do not let my head refuse it, For still my prayer is against their wicked deeds.

(Psa 141:5 NASB)

It may be seen as something of fatherly instruction:

My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD Or loathe His reproof, For whom the LORD loves He reproves, Even as a father *corrects* the son in whom he delights.

(Pro 3:11-12 NASB)

Indeed, it is seen as a path to wisdom:

He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof Will dwell among the wise.

(Pro 15:31 NASB)

Why should this be? Because the whole intent of rebuke is to produce repentance.

The Art of Repentance

There is a distinct difference between Godly and worldly sorrow. Worldly sorrow now goes by the psychiatric name of "guilt" - meaning a feeling, not a fact, as it does in the Scripture. The great portion of the money spent on psychiatrists is spent dealing with the problem of worldly sorrow. That is not the sorrow of which Paul speaks here; rather, Godly sorrow is characterized by one thing: repentance.

Godly sorrow brings repentance. We saw this at Pentecost. Remember what the crowd cried out, after Peter's sermon?

Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

(Act 2:37 NASB)

What shall we *do*? Peter told them to repent and be baptized. Indeed, Godly sorrow leads to salvation, says Paul. This has always been so, even in the times of the Old Testament:

and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

(2Ch 7:14 NASB)

Godly sorrow leaves no regrets, for confessed sin is forgiven sin. Some Christians have a hard time with this; hear the words of the apostle John:

We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.

(1Jn 3:19-20 NASB)

Sorrow which does not lead to repentance is worldly sorrow; and it is indeed fruitless. There is a sad example from the Old Testament, King Saul:

When David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" Then Saul lifted up his voice and wept. He said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have dealt well with me, while I have dealt wickedly with you. "You have declared

today that you have done good to me, that the LORD delivered me into your hand and *yet* you did not kill me. "For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safely? May the LORD therefore reward you with good in return for what you have done to me this day. "Now, behold, I know that you will surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hand. "So now swear to me by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants after me and that you will not destroy my name from my father's household." David swore to Saul. And Saul went to his home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

(1Sa 24:16-22 NASB)

Saul knew what was wrong; he was sorry for his sins - and did nothing about it. He died in his sins. Godly sorrow leads to repentance; repentance bears fruit.

The Fruit of Repentance

The first fruit of repentance is mentioned by Paul here as earnestness and eagerness to clear yourselves. This is known in the commentaries as *zeal*. It is that eagerness to do the right things in the right way. David gives us an example of this. Relying on his own wisdom, he decides to count the people, a way of gauging his military might. The thing does not please the Lord, who sends his Angel. The angel stops at a particular place (now the site of the Temple) - and David speaks to the Lord:

Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking down the people, and said, "Behold, it is I who have sinned, and it is I who have done wrong; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let Your hand be against me and against my father's house." So Gad came to David that day and said to him, "Go up, erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." David went up according to the word of Gad, just as the LORD had commanded. Araunah looked down and saw the king and his servants crossing over toward him; and Araunah went out and bowed his face to the ground before the king. Then Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" And David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be held back from the people." Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what is good in his sight. Look, the oxen for the burnt offering, the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. "Everything, O king, Araunah gives to the king." And Araunah said to the king, "May the LORD your God accept you." However, the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will surely buy *it* from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

(2Sa 24:17-24 NASB)

Paul puts the command more simply to the Romans"

not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;

(Rom 12:11 NASB)

The next fruit of repentance given here is *indignation*. Life in the late twentieth century, with its constant exposure to violence and sin, has robbed us of the capability of being indignant without hypocrisy. The ancient Psalmist knew it well, however:

The arrogant utterly deride me, *Yet* I do not turn aside from Your law. I have remembered Your ordinances from of old, O LORD, And comfort myself.

(Psa 119:51-52 NASB)

Third, there is the longing every Christian should have, or *hope* - here expressed and longing and concern. Jeremiah knew this well, in a passage which has been the basis for many songs:

This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. *They* are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I have hope in Him." The LORD is good to

those who wait for Him, To the person who seeks Him. *It is* good that he waits silently For the salvation of the LORD.

(Lam 3:21-26 NASB)

Finally, there is what Paul here calls a readiness to see justice done. This burning desire to see justice is the foundation of "social Gospel" in its best sense:

The righteous is concerned for the rights of the poor, The wicked does not understand *such* concern.

(Pro 29:7 NASB)

Rebuke produces Repentance

Repentance produces Fruit

Self Sacrifice - 2 Corinthians 8

It is a curious thing about the twentieth century American: he has nothing to live for. We have everything to live with - and a great reluctance to part with it. We cannot understand the "fanatic" who would part with everything he owns for the sake of "the cause," whatever cause it might be. There is a yearning for self sacrifice - and no cause worthy of it. Modern man assumes this to be mental illness, and prescribes the old Roman remedy - bread and circuses. Paul assumes this the normal state of man, and sets about encouraging it. In the very first verse, he makes the key connection: their self sacrifice is from the grace of God.

The Macedonian Example

Now, brethren, we *wish to* make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, *they gave* of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and *this*, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

(2Co 8:1-5 NASB)

There is almost a mathematical absurdity to our minds here:

Severe trial

+ Overflowing joy

+ Extreme poverty

=====

Rich Generosity

This is the example of the Macedonians. As example, we can but point out some unusual (to our minds) characteristics:

They asked to give. Paul did not come to them, asking for a gift to support the Mother Church of Jerusalem. They heard the story of how the Christians of Jerusalem had been thrown into poverty as a result of their faith, and they asked for permission to help. Paul didn't ask them (and, by the way, he didn't ask the Corinthians either. They came with the idea themselves).

They gave "beyond their ability." They did not give out of their wealth but out of their poverty. One can almost picture the widow's mite. If you have ever been on the receiving end of this, you know its impact.

They gave themselves to God first. "They did not do as we expected..." Paul was thinking that he would have to persuade them to give. He would probably have cited the need of the mother church, the support of the Apostles themselves, the great mission of converting the Jews, God's chosen people, and so on. He did not have to. The Macedonians gave themselves to God first - and the rest followed as

day follows night. How often the preacher or teacher views "Giving" as the toughest topic - when in fact he is preaching a result, not a cause.

We have a gentleman in our class (Steve Carr) whose task it is to go out and raise money for Pacific Christian College. He employs a variety of arguments, such as-

- * Use matching gifts, it's good stewardship
- * Look at all the good the college does for the church
- * Remember your days at PCC

How much easier it would be for him if, like the Macedonians, Christians gave themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord! What a different job it would be if he were restraining some Christians from giving, so that others might have the privilege!

The great test of love is this: What phrase, composed of "three little words, eight little letters," truly expresses love? MAY I HELP?

Encouraging the Body of Christ

Paul now proceeds from example (of the Macedonians) to practical encouragement of self sacrifice. He does this in a number of ways, shown here:

So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, *see* that you abound in this gracious work also. I am not speaking *this* as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

[\(2Co 8:6-9 NASB\)](#)

He sent a man, not an appeal. Christianity is a group activity. Solo flights, long distance correspondence are not the essentials of the church. If you want to encourage someone, send someone to encourage.

He used their own example. He points out how well they do in other things - and simply encourages them to be consistent in this too. (Even then we see a reluctance to "put your money where your mouth is.")

He shuns commandment. "Forced generosity" is an oxymoron. What is wanted is the spirit of the matter - the heart - for God sees the heart. When I want my child to clean her room, I must decide whether I want

- a) just the room cleaned - in which case I could rent a bulldozer and do it myself.
- b) her to clean the room - in which case I need only a bullwhip and time.
- c) her to want to clean her room - which, at present, will require a miracle.

He cites the supreme example - Jesus Christ. David Livingstone, the great missionary to Africa of the nineteenth century, put it this way:

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paying back a small part of the great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind and a bright hope of glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege.

Paul understood that too:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,
(Php 3:7-8 NASB)

Barriers to Self Sacrifice

Paul is well aware that example and encouragement will sound hollow if the barriers to self sacrifice are not removed. He identifies some of these in this next session:

I give *my* opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do *this*, but also to desire *to do it*. But now finish doing it also, so that just as *there was* the readiness to desire it, so *there may be* also the completion of it by your ability. For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what *a person* has, not according to what he does not have. For *this* is not for the ease of others *and* for your affliction, but by way of equality-- at this present time your abundance *being a supply* for their need, so that their abundance also may become *a supply* for your need, that there may be equality; as it is written, "HE WHO *gathered* MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO *gathered* LITTLE HAD NO LACK."
(2Co 8:10-15 NASB)

Some of these barriers, shown here, are

The untrained will. The Corinthians were eager, but undisciplined. They were the first to give and to have the desire - but they didn't follow through. We sometimes take that even further. We enjoy the emotional uplift of doing God's will - as we hear the sermon, as we listen to the music, - and then we go away and do nothing. We must train the will to follow through on the encouragement given the heart.

Value is by sacrifice, not by dollars. Many of us feel that because others can do so much more, there is no value in the little we can do. A glance at the Widow's Mite should dispel this notion, but we as human beings need the reminder. Paul delivers it here (verse 12).

A sense of fairness is required. We must be assured that the needy are indeed just that; and that our gift is not because they are somehow better than us, or more deserving - rather, just the opposite. Our turn may come; we are in this together. What is fairer than brother sharing with brother?

Honesty must be demonstrated. It is not sufficient to be honest; it is also necessary to show honesty. Paul goes to great lengths to do just that - which is particularly wise in light of the accusations he mentions. See what he does:

But thanks be to God who puts the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he has gone to you of his own accord. We have sent along with him the brother whose fame in *the things of the gospel has spread* through all the churches; and not only *this*, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work, which is being administered by us for the glory of the Lord Himself, and *to show* our readiness, taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. We have sent with them our brother, whom we have often tested and found diligent in many things, but now even more diligent because of *his* great confidence in you. As for Titus, *he is* my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, *they are* messengers of the churches, a glory to Christ. Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.

(2Co 8:16-24 NASB)

Much of the success of Billy Graham's ministry has been the result of the "Modesto Manifesto" - a statement of principles which kept Billy and the money apart. In his long ministry there has been no hint of scandal - because of this principle. See what rewards that has reaped!

Summary

By example, by encouragement, by removing barriers, Paul encourages these early believers to the life of self sacrifice. If your life seems both easy and hollow, is there a lesson here for you? Paul opens the section by declaring what the grace of God has done for the Macedonians. He will do it for you, too.

Cheerful Giver - 2 Corinthians 9

It is common for a church to ask for money; it is fairly common to remind the believer (when asking) that "God loveth a cheerful giver" (the old King James is so much more quotable); It is somewhat rare to remind the believer of being a cheerful giver without asking for money; it is downright unusual to explain the how and why of cheerful giving - and the results that it brings.

Paul's "Dutch Uncle" Talk

In our first section, we find Paul, the Apostle, in full authority, reminding his children of what they are to do:

For it is superfluous for me to write to you about this ministry to the saints; for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the Macedonians, *namely*, that Achaia has been prepared since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I have sent the brethren, in order that our boasting about you may not be made empty in this case, so that, as I was saying, you may be prepared; otherwise if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we--not to speak of you--will be put to shame by this confidence. So I thought it necessary to urge the brethren that they would go on ahead to you and arrange beforehand your previously promised bountiful gift, so that the same would be ready as a bountiful gift and not affected by covetousness.

(2Co 9:1-5 NASB)

Relying on his children. Paul is telling them that he has bragged on them - and now they better deliver. Sounds a little harsh - but they made the commitment, not Paul. Just like my dad to me (and me to my sons), dad tells son to follow through. Follow through on what? The commitment you made so enthusiastically. The first essential of giving is that it come from a commitment in the heart. Here's how Moses was commanded on the matter:

{2} "Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from each man *whose heart prompts him to give.* -- Exodus 25:2 (NIV italics added)

Follow Through. Paul knows these children all too well. They are emotional people who will commit, but not follow through. It sounds cold to our cynical ears, but what he does next is in fact practical help. He sends someone to encourage and help them. In short, he does whatever is necessary to help them follow through.

We often fail in this. People make a commitment - and then we allow them to fail in the follow through. If we consider ourselves our brother's keeper, we should not do this. It sounds like "pressure sales" to us - to Paul, it was helping his children keep their promises to God. We do this (as in Promise Keepers) in many areas, but our money seems more sacred than God.

Preparation prevents grudging giving. The oft-repeated phrase, "God loveth a cheerful giver," is found in the next section. So how do we prevent grudging giving? By preparation! Think of it this way:

Suppose Steve talks this class into giving a thousand dollars to PCC (slick tongued salesman that he is!) Further suppose that we promise to do so by the end of the year. That gives us six months - and we wind up doing it at Christmas. If Christmas rolls around, and money is tight, how do we feel about that thousand dollars? What kind of look is on our faces? (And how low is attendance that week?)

But suppose that we put aside fifty dollars a week - no great trick for a class of this size. In twenty weeks (a month and half to spare) we have the money ready. We have change to spare! Now what kind of look is on our faces? This is why Paul told the Corinthian church in his first letter to put things aside on the first day of the week:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.

(1Co 16:1-2 NASB)

Indeed, in the Old Testament, the Jews were explicitly warned against being unprepared, in the matter of release:

{7} If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. {8} Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. {9} *Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought:* "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. {10} *Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart;* then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. {11} There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. -- Deuteronomy 15:7-11 (NIV italics added)

The Principles of Giving

Paul next goes on to lay out the principles of giving:

Now this *I say*, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one *must do* just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written, "HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER." Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God.

(2Co 9:6-11 NASB)

Measure for measure - the principle of sowing. It is important to understand that this is not "health and wealth" gospel. It is rather a question of the container size (remember Elisha and the oil?). The principle is not one of bargaining with God. Rather, it is a question of understanding God's character and how He reacts to the giver. Our Lord put it this way:

"Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure--pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."

(Luk 6:38 NASB)

You see the point? God will use your measuring cup when ladling out His blessings to you. He deals with you in your own terms. The Old Testament put it forcefully:

One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, And He will repay him for his good deed.

(Pro 19:17 NASB)

The old King James puts the phrase "he will reward him" as "will he pay him again" - and one scholar of memory added, "and what a marvelous rate of interest!"

Motive in giving. It is important to see that motive is more important than gift. Indeed, the Lord needs nothing from us, and we need everything from Him. C.S. Lewis explained it as being like having a small child come up to his father and ask for ten dollars to buy him a Father's Day present. It's a loving gesture, and the father really does appreciate it, but your accountant would not consider the father to be ten dollars to the good.

This, by the way, explains God's complete indifference to the size of the gift. What difference does it make how much you give? He owns everything anyway. Everything - except the heart you withhold from Him.

So we find that God wants a cheerful giver. What does this mean? What motive are we talking about? I'm cheerful enough when drunk; is this a reason to get sauced? Consider the Scripture again:

And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

(1Co 13:3 NASB)

The cheerful giver is the one motivated by love.

Rich in every way. If you are enamored of "health and wealth gospel," you will think that God owes you wealth if you give. God owes you nothing; you borrow the very idea of existence from Him. But if you will trust Him, you will be rich in every way. Remember?

"Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. "But if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more *will He clothe you*? You men of little faith! "And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying. "For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. "But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. "Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

(Luk 12:27-34 NASB)

The issue is not one of wealth, but of trust. If your heart is with him, so will your money be. Your money He does not need; He loves you and desires your heart fully. It is the only thing, ultimately, that you can really withhold from Him.

The Power of Praise

Paul now turns to the results of giving:

If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the *food* of the temple, *and* those who attend

regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel. But I have used none of these things. And I am not writing these things so that it will be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one.

(1Co 9:12-15 NASB)

God is glorified. For Paul, whose heart is in the Gospel, the great blessing of such an act is not the physical relief it brings. Rather, it is first that God is glorified. Men will praise God because of what you have done. The principle is an Old Testament one: you honor God with your wealth:

Honor the LORD from your wealth And from the first of all your produce; So your barns will be filled with plenty And your vats will overflow with new wine.

(Pro 3:9-10 NASB)

There is an interesting example of this in the New Testament:

{10:1} At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. {2} He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. {3} One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" {4} Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "*Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.*" -- Acts 10:1-4 (NIV italics added)

You see the point?

People will pray for you. "Prayer helps - in any denomination." One of the most potent forces on earth is a devout little old lady on her knees. And if that lady is praying, thanking God that you are so generous? Think what must have happened to these ladies:

Soon afterwards, He *began* going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, and *also* some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.

(Luk 8:1-3 NASB)

How would like to have Jesus Himself thank God for you, in His prayers? Do you suppose it happens when you aid His brothers and sisters?

The Question of Obedience. One final thought must be brought out. You must put your money where your mouth is. If you say you are a Christian, where is your money? If you expect people to praise God because of you, they must see your actions. This is "the obedience which accompanies your confession" or, as the King James puts it, "your professed subjection." It is indeed commanded:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. *Instruct them* to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

(1Ti 6:17-19 NASB)

In America the wealthy, it is hard to avoid this one. But if you need any further motivation (and I hope you don't), consider these words of our Lord, concerning his coming again:

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. "All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' "The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me.' "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me *nothing* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' "Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' "Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

(Mat 25:31-46 NASB)

Thus speaks the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Creator. To sum it up, He asks you to

- prepare for giving
- give cheerfully
- receive bountifully

It is an act of love, and an act of obedience. And in the last day, He will separate the obedient from the damned.

Humility - 2 Corinthians 10

Paul begins (in the tenth chapter) a defense of his Apostolic authority. In passing, it makes an excellent (I hope) lesson on the subject of humility:

Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ--I who am meek when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent! I ask that when I am present I *need* not be bold with the confidence with which I propose to be courageous against some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh. For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. *We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete. You are looking at things as they are outwardly. If anyone is confident in himself that he is Christ's, let him consider this again within himself, that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. For even if I boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be put to shame, for I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters. For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible." Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons *we are* also in deed when present. For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding. But we will not boast beyond *our* measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; not boasting beyond *our* measure, *that is*, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, *and* not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another. But HE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD. For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.

(2Co 10:1-18 NASB)

Mistakes about humility

The word "humility" in the English language has changed its meaning over the years - one of Satan's prize techniques for confusing the Christian is to promote this. We often have the idea that true humility is to think ourselves much worse than we really are. This is simple dishonesty. Paul in this passage identifies several other mistakes:

Humility is not timidity. Perhaps an example will suffice. Suppose that I believe that Liz and Jerry's upcoming wedding is not permitted to Christians. I may not choose to deal with this in private. I might prefer to confront them in public (preferably with a cloud of sympathetic witnesses) and boldly denounce their wicked plan. No positive result can be expected of this, but I appear to be bold and courageous for the faith.

The Scripture commands me to first approach them privately. This may appear to be a timid approach - one which meticulously avoids giving offense. Sometimes it takes more courage to appear to be a coward than to appear to be a hero.

Humility is not to be judged by the world's weapons. The world wants to know who won and who lost. OK. I'll tell you. Jesus Christ won - at Calvary; and so did we. Since then the world's weapons are not Christ's weapons. We are not to judge humility by whether or not we "won." The rest is battlefield cleanup. Sometimes that means getting our hands dirty. If we must bear the pain of someone else, and do so in Christ's name, then the world's standards simply don't apply.

Humility is not comparing yourself to yourself. (Or anyone else - that's pride). It may be very true that you are knowledgeable in the Scriptures; that you are kind to animals and have excellent control of your tongue. All these things are good. They are not humility, however. If anything at all, humility is the refusal to make the comparison to anyone.

Humility looks below the surface. Women understand this. They look in the mirror in the morning and say, "that's not me." They don't leave the makeup behind until "me" stares back from the mirror. In short, they adjust the surface to fit the reality (or at least what they want it to be). Humility looks beneath the surface of the mirror and says, "How does God see me?"

The insidious result: false credit. Paul here gives an excellent test of the false humility of his "spiritual" rivals. Do you take credit for another person's work? I once baptized a woman. I did not lead her to Christ; I did not teach her the necessity of immersion. I just happened to be her teacher when she decided to be immersed, after many years of obedience. How much credit do I deserve? How much credit could I have taken?

The characteristics of true humility

Humility tells the truth. Paul put it this way to the Romans:

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

[\(Rom 12:3 NASB\)](#)

Sober judgment, based on our accomplishments, is the basis of humility. It is not humility to say you are stupid when you are smart; fat when you are thin or ugly when you are not. We rightly recognize foolish pride when we take too much credit; do we also recognize foolish humility? Frederick Buechner put it this way:

"True humility doesn't consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anybody else."

Humility is under authority. One important aspect of sober judgment is to recognize the tasks and gifts that God has given me. It is one thing to say, "I am a Bible teacher, a very important worker in the Kingdom of God" with an air of pride. It is another to say it with humility, and follow up with, "and therefore I must be diligent in my studies - even when no one sees me at work." "It ain't bragging if you can do it," says Mr. Durocher. We need to see that humility is a proper evaluation of one's place in the kingdom - and that cannot be done unless you are under the authority of that kingdom. A sense that you are a servant of the Lord, under His authority (and He has it all), is essential to true humility.

Humility is rewarded by true authority. False humility seeks its reward from men ("Oh, I am so proud of how humble I am.") True humility knows that its reward is from God. It therefore seeks nothing from man. This is a perfectly natural thing. The humble man turns to God first; the proud man turns to God last. And with which of the two is the Almighty better acquainted?

The results of true humility

Paul here points out three results of true humility:

It demolishes argument and pretense. It demolishes argument because it is based upon the ultimate fact of the universe.

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

(1Co 1:22-25 NASB)

Logic cannot withstand it, for it is based upon the ultimate fact. It is not my argument; it is God's argument to you. It is not my logic, but His. You are not arguing with me, but with the Almighty.

Pretense cannot withstand it either. I may be able to convince you that I'm too good a person to need a savior; I cannot convince Him.

It takes captive every thought. In pride I am always thinking of myself; in humility I don't think of myself at all. My thoughts are trained on those for whom Christ died. Humility is not "not thinking;" it is thinking of the right things. It is the hallmark of the disciplined mind.

It punishes every disobedient act - once obedience is complete. The humble man looks at himself and knows: "I must do something about that." Sin is confessed quickly, and disobedience quelled as soon as it is recognized. It is not being hag-ridden about sin, but rather quick to fix the mistakes.

I've used the illustration before, but it's a good one. I once passed a young man on the campus of Cal State Fullerton. He was in the middle of a large field, practicing the trumpet. He was doing scales. There is no way to practice the trumpet quietly. When he made a mistake, he went back and tried again, fixing it. He did not care what I thought about his notes; he was improving his art.

Pride is letting them hear you perform. Humility is letting them hear you practice.

Discernment - 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to give advice when you are not involved? I have a teenage son whom I'm trying to encourage to good work habits ("attitude, kid, attitude!") If he got such good advice from a stranger, or from a book, or from the radio, or from TV, he would accept it willingly. If it comes from Dad, what does he know?

What's the difference? I'm involved in his life. It is the first rule of the "professional" counselor - never get involved. (Note well: the first rule for the Christian servant is "get involved.") And when you are involved, it is difficult to persuade. This morning, we will see St. Paul doing just that, on a most serious matter. Men have come into the Corinthian church, claiming to be apostles, with a "new" doctrine (actually, the old one of legalism).

Before we see what he says and how he says it, note well what he does not say: he does not repeat his experience on the road to Damascus. (Did you like it when dad said, "When I was your age..."). Note too that the focus of this lesson is not how to deliver parental advice - but how to discern among the prophets - and why.

Paul's Technique

I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me. For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you *as* a pure virgin. But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity *of devotion* to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear *this* beautifully. For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles. But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not *so* in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made *this* evident to you in all things.

(2Co 11:1-6 NASB)

Paul begins with a bit of disarming sarcasm. It's as if he was saying, "Hey, I know this sounds so foolish, but really, we must get back to the fundamentals here. See how low I must stoop to persuade you?" This is necessary to establish his motives. It is important for the Corinthians to see that he is proceeding from Godly motives.

The first of these motives is "godly jealousy." It often surprises Christians to hear God described as "jealous." We think of jealousy as a sin (we actually mean envy, in most cases), but the Scripture is clear: God is a jealous God:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,

(Exo 20:4-5 NASB)

Here, in the second commandment, God portrays himself. It is not really that hard to understand - if you are married. I am a jealous husband; I want my wife all to myself. Please don't tell me that I need to be "open minded" or "liberated" - I am a jealous husband. She is mine, mine, mine! (By the way, she's a jealous wife, too.) I am jealous of anything that comes between us - and I should be.

The next of these motives is his promise to God. He wants to present the Corinthians as a pure bride to the bridegroom. One of the powerful images of the church is that of the bride of Christ. It explains God's jealousy in terms I can understand - and it also explains the need for purity. Paul sees himself as the friend of the bridegroom (see John the Baptist, John 3:29(?)) - one of whose functions was to see to it that the purity of the bride was maintained. (A function later performed by big brothers.)

Finally, there is his fear of their deception. This is a natural thing for a teacher: picture that you have spent all this time teaching them algebra, and then they go and make a mistake like that.... how do you feel?

Paul then (verse 4) identifies their real problem: they're too easy. They'll put up with anything; they're like Dorothy Sayre's mythical St. Lukewarm the Tolerator, who erected a public stewpot for some religious cannibals, and was promptly boiled in it. Turned out he was overcooked, and became St. Lukewarm the Intolerable.

Why were they so easy to accept any doctrine? There are a number of possibilities:

- ✚ It could be just plain laziness. Thinking is work; resisting the Devil is work.
- ✚ It could be the temptation of legalism.
- ✚ It could be that the church was, for them as for so many of us, a weekly emotional "high" - and nothing else. What matters the doctrine if my feelings soar?

It's useful at this point to recognize some of the techniques used by Satan to deceive such people:

- ✚ The three step method, first noticed with Eve:
 - Question God's word. "Did God really say that?"
 - Deny God's word. "He couldn't have said *that*"
 - Substitute Satan's word. "He must have meant...."
- ✚ The thought that "evil is enlightening" How do you know it's bad until you've tried it? ("You will not die, but you will become like God!")
- ✚ Confusing eloquence with divine wisdom. If it's well spoken, it must be right (he's so convincing, don't you see.)

Paul's response to all this (verse 6) is that he is just the opposite. Though he was a very well educated man, he did not come to them in human wisdom, making rabbinical discourse - but in the power of God. You see the point? I didn't use any of these tricks - and you believed the message. Therefore, the message was what convinced you, not me. Why are you changing now for those techniques?

By their fruits...

Paul now shows them what kind of preacher he is. He reminds them of how he came to them - and what he cost them:

Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? I robbed other churches by taking wages *from them* to serve you; and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept

myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be stopped in the regions of Achaia. Why? Because I do not love you? God knows *I do!* But what I am doing I will continue to do, so that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting.

(2Co 11:7-12 NASB)

Paul is making the same point that Christ made in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes* nor figs from thistles, are they? "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "So then, you will know them by their fruits. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

(Mat 7:15-23 NASB)

In essence, his argument is this: look at the fruits I brought, look at what they brought. I didn't charge you for the Gospel - I gave it to you free of charge. If for no other reason than this: the Gospel is *always* given. It is revealed wisdom, not something that men have found out for themselves. Permit me an example:

In the late nineteenth century, Orville J. Nave spent over 14 years cross indexing the Bible - by topic. He was entitled to the profits of that labor, for it is his. He created the work. But who created the Gospel, the "Good News?" God alone! Therefore, as Paul received it free, he could not charge for it. Derived wisdom may be sold at a profit. Revealed wisdom is priceless, and therefore must be given away.

Paul's basic motive is that of love, of course (see verse 11). Love cannot be purchased. Only the counterfeits of love can be purchased - and men rightly refer to this as prostitution, in whatever sense it is used. We speak of an artist prostituting his art in this way: prostitution is selling a substitute for love. (An interesting aside: the old guild system understood this as a craftsman prostituting his craft - a thing still in demand today.)

I think it bothered the Corinthian church that Paul had not charged them for the Gospel. There are a number of reasons why:

- ✚ In those days, a brilliant teacher was like a rock star today. He was entertainment, and could command an entertainer's salary (are you listening, Rush Limbaugh?)
- ✚ Perhaps they were jealous of the Philippians - who spent the money and received nothing (as we do when sending a missionary), while they spent nothing and received everything. Perhaps a point of pride?
- ✚ More likely, however, they were influenced by the philosophy of the Cynics. A cynic, said Oscar Wilde, is a "man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Perhaps they thought they were getting more because they were paying more.

It would be interesting to apply these principals to televangelists today!

Paul now comes to the point: he is doing this to remind them, to be sure, but mostly to cut the ground out from under these people. This brings up the point for the Christian: how do we identify such people? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in commenting on the passage from Matthew above, says it this way:

Such a pronouncement of Christ's could cause his disciples great anxiety. Who knows his neighbor? Who knows whether the outward appearance of a Christian conceals falsehood and deception underneath? No wonder if mistrust, suspicion and censoriousness crept into the Church. And no wonder if every brother who falls [sic] into sin incurred the uncharitable criticism of his brethren, now that Jesus has said this. All this distrust would ruin the Church but for the word of Jesus which assures us that the bad tree will bring forth bad fruit.. It is bound to give itself away sooner or later. There is no need to go about prying into the hearts of others. All we need do is wait until the tree bears fruit, and we shall not have to wait long.

The character of the opposition - and their fate

Paul now puts it bluntly: who these men are, and what awaits them:

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

[\(2Co 11:13-15 NASB\)](#)

It is, perhaps, surprising to hear such language. We might expect to hear "honestly mistaken" or "mislead." We don't. Such men are deceivers. Please recall that the issues being debated here are not such things as the correct form of communion or how many hymns must be sung in worship and whether or not a piano may be used. The attack here is upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. A man who reverts to legalism, once having tasted grace, is either exceedingly stupid or a deceiver. These men were not stupid.

Indeed, they follow Satan himself. If Satan can get you by flesh or the world, he will. If not, he will try for pride. He will appear to be an angel of light - and try to produce, as C.S. Lewis had Screwtape put it, "a spoiled saint, a Pharisee, an inquisitor or a magician...". These deceptions are worth cataloging:

- ✚ a spoiled saint - one resting on his laurels?
- ✚ a Pharisee - the classic legalist?
- ✚ an inquisitor - the one who is righteous, because you're not
- ✚ a magician - the "miracle working evangelist"

The reward of such men is known: reread Matthew 7:21-23 above.

There remains the question of what to do with such men. John, the Apostle of Love, puts the answer this way:

Now I ask you, lady, not as though *I were* writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does

not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into *your* house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.

(2Jn 1:5-11 NASB)

There is such a thing as aiding and abetting.

Suffering and Service - 2 Corinthians 11:16 - 12:13

There is a danger in being a Sunday School teacher (several, in fact; this is only one): you sometimes become so familiar with the characters of the Bible that you forget how extraordinary some of them are. Paul, in today's passage, is an example. This poor soul details (under pressure) a life of hardship so extreme that it would make Indiana Jones blush. Here he was, boy from the right side of the tracks, shipwrecked, flogged, stoned to the point of near death experience, harassed by "friend" and foe, bandits... you get the idea. We are sometimes tempted to spend the lesson time detailing his sufferings, wondering at them, and end with, "Go, and do likewise." The lesson is clinched when someone walks up and says, "Great lesson, teacher. Boy, are we all glad we're not like St. Paul!"

So I present, for your amusement and enjoyment, *The Cynic's Guide to Suffering and Service* (abbreviated), in which we will attempt to answer these three questions:

What benefit did St. Paul see in this suffering for himself?

What benefit is there for God and His kingdom in it?

How did he ever get through it all?

These are answered in one key verse:

And He has said to me, "**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.**" Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

(2Co 12:9 NASB)

What benefit did St. Paul see in this suffering for himself?

Kindly remember that Paul was warned. On the road to Damascus Jesus said that Paul would be shown what he would have to suffer for the sake of the name of Jesus. So, knowing that, why did Paul go on? To understand the answer to this, we must remember the key principle of Christian conduct: the imitation of Christ. To see to what end man must suffer for God, we need to look at Christ. Christ's suffering had (at least) three results for him:

Christ: the Suffering Servant

Obedience:

In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation,
(Heb 5:7-9 NASB)

It is not just that Jesus displayed obedience in His suffering (which of course He did) - but that He learned obedience. We touch on a great mystery: how can Jesus be both wholly God and wholly man? However it is, the man Jesus learned obedience - from what He suffered.

Exaltation:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself,

taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Php 2:5-11 NASB)

Look at the beginning of verse 9: "Therefore..." It is because of Jesus' suffering that He is exalted by God the father - to the point that every knee shall bow, not just on earth, not just the living on the planet, but the dead arisen and all the angels of heaven and demons of hell - including Satan himself. Suffering for God brings exaltation to Jesus.

Example:

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:2 NASB)

Not only is He exalted, He is become our example. As stated before, the principal rule of Christian conduct is the imitation of Christ. On Him we must "fix our eyes."

But, do these same things apply to us? After all, maybe Paul's the exception, here. God never told me what I would suffer for Him (mostly because I'd have been bored with the tale). We need to examine our suffering, and its blessings.

Our suffering for Him

There are a couple of preliminary points. First, we do not choose to suffer. Choosing to suffer is masochism, and is rightly diagnosed as mental illness. We choose, instead, to follow the will of God - knowing that it will lead to suffering. If you choose to be a star athlete, you choose to sweat and strain. How much more so if you choose to follow God in the ultimate trial of life?

Also, there is a sense in which we have no choice in the matter at all. We are not our own; we are bought with a price. We should not complain of suffering but rather rejoice. This is actually a fairly common attitude. Consider these two statements:

"That guy Hendershot is a slave driver! We worked 70-80 hours a week on the Sampson contract, and it was always deadlines, deadlines, deadlines. How we got everything done on time I'll never know."

"I remember working for Hendershot on the Sampson contract. Man, were we good, or what! It didn't matter what deadline they through at us, we met every one on time, even if we had to bust our chops for 70-80 hours a week."

See the difference? The first is a complaint about hours and work; the second, a fond memory of being on the first team doing a tough job - in fact, it's boasting! Yet the hours worked and the things accomplished are the same. Sometimes suffering is just a question of attitude.

So, these aside, let's look at the parallels between Christ's suffering and our own suffering for Him:

Obedience:

"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known.
(Deu 11:26-28 NASB)

It's tempting to say that this is a "push pull" situation: if you're a good boy, you get blessed; if you don't, you get cursed. That's the early version of it. We need to see these two in New Testament light: that suffering and obedience are intertwined. Sometimes obedience leads to suffering which leads to obedience which leads to you get the idea.

Exaltation

It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us;

(2Ti 2:11-12 NASB)

Did you ever think of yourself as *reigning* with Jesus? Well, think about it: you are the child of the King of Kings, aren't you? Indeed, the sufferings for the faith we have are evidence of our exaltation to come: therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. *This is* a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

(2Th 1:4-5 NASB)

Example:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by *your* opponents--which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that *too*, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,
(Php 1:27-29 NASB)

We are to be an example to the world. It must be admitted that Christians in twentieth century America are indeed poor examples. If you need the comparison, here's what a writer (Athanasius) wrote, about AD 310 - fifteen generations from Paul. He was reciting the proofs of the Resurrection of Christ. His argument included what today would be an amazing statement: that Christians laugh at ("despise") death - in essence, with that attitude, they must know something you don't. Here's what he has to say:

A very strong proof of this destruction of death and its conquest by the cross is supplied by a present fact, namely this. All the disciples of Christ despise death, they take the offensive against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as something dead. Before the divine advent of the Savior, even the holiest of men were afraid of death, and mourned the dead as those who perish. But now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, but all those who believe in Christ tread it underfoot as nothing and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection. But that devil who of old wickedly exulted in death, now that the pains of death are loosed,

he alone it is who remains truly dead. There is proof of this too; for men who, before they believe in Christ, think death horrible and are afraid of it, once they are converted despise it so completely that they go eagerly to meet it, and themselves become witnesses of the Savior's resurrection from it. Even children hasten thus to die, and not men only, but women train themselves by bodily discipline to meet it. So weak has death become that even women, who used to be taken in by it, mock at it now as a dead thing, robbed of all its strength. Death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch; bound hand and foot as he now is, the passers-by jeer at him, hitting him and abusing him, no longer afraid of his cruelty and rage, because of the king who has conquered him. So has death been conquered and branded for what it is by the Savior on the cross. It is bound hand and foot, all who are in Christ trample it as they pass and as witnesses to Him deride it, scoffing and saying, "O Death, where is thy victory? O Grave, where is thy sting?"

(Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, V-27)

C.S. Lewis, commenting on this passage, remarks, "We cannot point to the high virtue of Christian living and the gay, almost mocking courage of Christian martyrdom, as a proof of our doctrines which Athanasius takes as a matter of course. But whoever may be to blame for that it is not Athanasius."

What benefit is there for God and His kingdom in it?

In asking this question there is an implicit assumption: that God, like us, must triumph to win. This seriously underestimates what God can do. Michael Card once wrote a song about "the power of paradox." God's power is made perfect in weakness, Paul assures us. Indeed, so sure is Paul of this that he says:

If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.

(2Co 11:30 NASB)

Over and again, in Old Testament and in New Testament, God picks the weakness of man in which to perfect His strength. To cite one outstanding example, remember King David? When Samuel came to anoint a king from among Jesse's sons, Jesse - knowing that Samuel would be looking for the best possible candidate - send the runt of the litter out to tend the sheep while Samuel looked over the six brothers. Dad knew that little David was "least likely to succeed." And indeed there is no record of objection from David on that point either! But God saw otherwise.

God is so far above us in His ways that His weakness will suffice for all our strength. Indeed, as For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

(1Co 1:22-25 NASB)

We also sometimes forget that God's kingdom is in need of suffering for God's own purposes. If God is to judge the world, is it surprising that He wants His children presentable for the occasion?

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the

Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

(1Pe 4:12-19 NASB)

You see the point? God is well able to make suffering useful

- ✚ to display His strength through weakness
- ✚ to display His wisdom in what we see as foolishness
- ✚ to purge His children of unrighteousness

How did he ever get through it all?

"OK, John, you have me convinced. But how did Paul ever get through all of that. I know what comfort the Lord gives me - and doesn't. And I can tell you that I'd never make it through all that."

Neither would I. Neither would any of us. But God does not pre-package His grace, ladling it out like Thanksgiving gravy, one spoonful to a customer. He tailors grace to the needs of each of us:

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed;

(2Co 9:8 NASB)

The words "abound" and "all" just run through that passage, don't they? Sometimes we forget this principle, and not only for ourselves. We sometimes look at those who have suffered greatly and say, "I wish I was a saint who could endure suffering like that." We forget that God provides the grace.

Sometimes we challenge God on why He would allow such suffering in an individual. We think it's unfair. But remember that Christ apportions grace as well as suffering:

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

(Eph 4:7 NASB)

Of most interest to me, however, is the thought that God gives this grace in a very unusual method: He allows my suffering to drive me back to Him. One of the great saints of the Renaissance put it this way:

It is good for us to encounter troubles and adversities from time to time, for trouble often compels a man to search his own heart. It reminds him that he is an exile here, and that he can put his trust in nothing in this world. It is good, too, that we sometimes suffer opposition, and that men think ill of us and misjudge us, even when we do and mean well. Such things are an aid to humility, and preserve us from pride and vainglory. For we more readily turn to God as our inward witness, when men despise us and think no good of us.

A man should therefore place such complete trust in God that he has no need of comfort from men. When a good man is troubled, tempted, or vexed by evil thoughts, he comes more clearly than ever to realize his need of God, without whom he can do nothing good. Then, as he grieves and laments his lot, he

turns to prayer amid his misfortunes. He is weary of life, and longs for death to release him, that he may be dissolved, and be with Christ. It is then that he knows with certainty that there can be no complete security nor perfect peace in his life.

(Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, I-12)

Paul certainly knew this feeling well. He describes it as his "thorn in the flesh" - though the word "thorn" might as well be translated "stake." He came in time to see it as that which kept him from becoming proud. It is well to remember that Satan fell - through pride.