

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

Second Letter to the Corinthians

Acts of the Apostles

Readings: *2 Corinthians 10:1-13:14; Acts 20:2-3*

Reflections:

- Defense of Paul's authorship – Paul's response to charge: We see immediately the sharp tone as well as Paul introducing himself by name. This is the basic reason why some scholars assume that this is the harsh letter referenced in the previous chapters of 2 Corinthians. Apparently one or two people in Corinth are disrespecting Paul and causing major issues for the church there and so Paul writes this letter to take them on and set things straight. Paul sets out that this is a spiritual battle and they are not going to stop until they win the battle. Paul makes it clear that arguments and rationalizations are spiritual strongholds that the enemy can use and so as spiritual leaders they take these on to make sure that every thought is fully obedient (captive like a slave) to Christ. The statement about punishing every act of obedience seems harsh. Punishment in this context is confrontation and possible disassociation. It would not be a physical attack obviously. We can see how upset Paul is right off the top.
- Appearances and letters: Spiritual leadership requires being able to see past appearances and discern the heart. Paul's humble posture when he was in community was being misread as weakness and so apparently the report came back to him that some were mocking and dismissing his authority and leadership. Paul is giving them a heads up that he is not going to let these people get away with these attitudes and comments. Sometimes leadership requires confrontation and as we read in the previous chapters the confrontation we read here led to repentance and a real change of heart.
- Comparisons with others: Paul gives another good principle here. Unwise, proud people compare themselves with others, their own friends or associates. Wise people compare themselves to Christ and as a result remain humble and focused on their own spiritual growth. Paul's confidence does not rest in how he compares with others but rather in how faithful is he to the work God has called him. "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." Paul is giving them the proper mindset of always focusing on Jesus. It is only the one whom Jesus affirms that matters. People may judge but only Christ's perspective matters.

- Oratory versus knowledge: The Corinthians were following the lead of some who claimed to be “super-apostles.” Just even taking that title reveals their pride. Paul warns about being deceived by such eloquent, yet deceptively proud leaders. It isn’t how great a speaker a person is but rather how well they actually know God, his kingdom and his love.
- Preaching a matter of love: Paul’s love motivated him to serve them without asking for any financial support. He was being put down by some as not being fully legitimate because he served them for free. Again we see proud people are all about position, prestige, and money. Paul’s heart is love and service, seeking to offer all he can for free.
- Others’ preaching a ruse: Paul now clearly labels these false teachers as workers of the enemy. “...false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ...Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.” Here is a key point. The work of the enemy is not to deceive with darkness but with light: truth mixed with one or two key lies. Fish don’t bite a hook unless there is bait on it. Satan loves to appear to be holy and righteous so that people are deceived and trapped. This is why religion is one of his favorite strategies to place people in bondage. It has all the appearances of righteousness and yet it takes people captive and makes them self-righteous, judgmental, inactive and isolated.
- Paul forced to boast: Here Paul is really ticked off. Paul is frustrated because others are insulting them and yet they are accepting it while Paul is trying to lovingly serve them and they are rejecting him.
- Basis for boasting: Paul here admits he is a fool to even entertain the compassion with these supposed “super-apostles” but he is so frustrated he decides to put his own ministry resume out. This is Paul’s “you wanna mess with me?” As we review what Paul writes it fully aligns with what we know from Acts and it also underscores the kind of suffering, persecution and pain he underwent in his obedience to Christ. Take a look at the list: Israelite, servant of Christ, flogged five times, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, imprisoned, shipwrecked, 24 hours floating on the open sea, gone without sleep, in constant danger, hungry and without food, even cold and naked. On top of this Paul has felt the pressure of leading these churches as well as face the personal temptation of sin. Paul is completely honest and authentic. He doesn’t try to lead out of a posture of having it all together rather from being completely raw honest about his struggles.
- Sufferings indicate strength: Paul’s confidence is in his weaknesses because they best reveal Christ in him. He gives one example of how Christ rescued him in Damascus (See Acts 9:23-25). This example from Paul helps confirm the historicity and attention to detail from Luke in writing Acts.
- Revelations verify: Here we have one of the most important passages within Paul’s writings as he shares personally his own experience of seeing the resurrected Jesus. This is critical to understanding and grasping Paul’s personal experience of seeing the resurrected Jesus. Paul is very humble and takes the position of third person but obviously this is his own story and key to his apostolic authority. Here is what Paul shares: 1) It was fourteen years ago; 2) The

third heaven is the dwelling place of God. The first heaven is the sky where the birds fly. The second heaven is the stars; 3) Paul is uncertain if this experience was an out of body experience or he was physical transported to heaven. From the accounts of Acts it would appear that it was a vision into heaven rather than Paul being transported physically to heaven; 4) Paul felt he was in paradise. Here paradise is used as another word for heaven where God dwells. See Luke 23:43 where paradise refers to the place where those who are righteous go when they die. See Revelations 2:7 for a reference to paradise that parallels Isaiah 51:3 and Ezekiel 36:35 to restoration of Edenic paradise at the end of time. These are the only references to paradise in the New Testament writings; 5) Paul heard inexpressible things. The revelation he received was bigger than a simple encounter with Jesus. At some level there is mystery to the profound encounter Paul had with the resurrected Jesus. This is a part of this deep understanding into the things of God. This encounter with Jesus is the basis for all of Paul's understanding to Jesus as Lord and Christ (Messiah) as well as to the meaning and nature of the salvation that trusting (faith) in Jesus brings into a person's life and relationship with God. We should expect that those who encounter God in such a direct way would come away both having a hard time expressing what they experienced as well as being guarded about attempting to explain it in such a way as it doesn't do justice to the depth of the experience.

- Weakness for Christ's sake: God grounds Paul in the depth of the revelation he gives him in Christ. Yet God also allows difficulty to be a part of Paul's experience so that Paul is continually brought to dependence and humility before God and other people. God works through dependence and humility and so struggle and difficult become allies, not enemies to our spiritual growth and maturation. A "thorn in your side" (see Numbers 33:55; Judges 2:3) were people who were supposed to be driven out of the Promised Land but because they were tolerated became a constant source of grief and spiritual opposition. Paul uses a variation of this term to describe a false spiritual leader who is causing him constant grief. Paul uses the term "flesh" instead of "side" to emphasize that although this is causing his natural self pain, God is using this to strengthen his spirit. Paul also calls this leader a "messenger of Satan" sent to torment or harass him. Paul pleads three times (three represents completion like "three strikes you are out!") for God to take this person away. Rather than answering Paul's prayer as Paul hopes, God answers Paul by giving him grace in his weakness. This is a vital truth all Christ-followers must grasp to the core of their being. God's power is most fully and perfectly revealed in our weakness. Therefore God will lead us into situations that reveal our weakness so that his power can be revealed and in this, he receives glory for doing the impossible. Paul grasps this truth as God says to him, "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made (or shown) perfect in weakness." God spoke this to Paul and it transformed his perspective. Now Paul can delight in those moments of weakness, difficulty and even suffering knowing that these places become the best showcases to display God's grace and power. We should also note that God's grace is described as sufficient rather than triumphant. God's grace gets us through but sometimes

just barely. We don't feel strong but we see in hindsight how strong God is through us and in us.

- Miracles and credentials: Paul goes on to confront again the Corinthians for their attitude in placing Paul beneath the "super-apostles" when he had performed even miracles among them. He feels that he is forced to talk like a fool in having to defend his own standing as a legitimate leader.
- No ulterior advantage: Paul now challenges them for saying that he tried to exploit them because he didn't ask for financial support personally or for the leaders who went there to serve them. Paul's desire to serve, to love and to invest in this church was apparently being used against him. He is dripping with sarcasm when he declares how he tricked them by not wanting any support.
- Reason for defense: Even Paul challenging them right now is for their betterment. This is the only thing that motivates Paul. Paul is open that he is afraid that they are living in angry, broken relationships and self-indulgence. Paul addresses these two major struggles in his letter to the Ephesians and it no doubts represents two of the most common areas of temptation and failure both in Paul's time and throughout human history.
- Regarding troublemakers: Paul quotes Deuteronomy 19:15 in reminding the people that he is not going to listen to rumors but that every matter must be established by two or three witnesses. Paul will bring the power of God through the Spirit to hold them accountable. He will do this by speaking the truth in love, challenging those who are leading people the wrong direction, and by making sure there is no room for deception or manipulation from these false leaders. Sometimes leaders feel very weak when confronting other people who are having a very negative influence. This weakness though doesn't mean the leader should back down but rather that God wants to use their tangible feeling of weakness to grow in them a sense of true humility and brokenness even as they come to speak the truth in love to people who are not submitting to God.
- Each to examine him or herself: Paul calls them to do careful self-examination in light of what he has said. We are all responsible to examine our hearts before God and to allow God to challenge us and speak to use. We should not rely on other people to do the hard work of discerning our hearts before God but rather each of us should do this work before God desires to speak to us and convict us of places that are out of line. Paul's constant prayer is for their perfection. Perfection in this case means full maturity or coming to a complete understanding and experience of God's grace, not being so perfect that you never make a mistake again. Paul wants to use his authority for constructive, not destructive purposes as he feels spiritually responsible for their growth. Again as we look at the third letter (2 Corinthians 1-9) it would appear that Paul's confrontation clearly meant that they were beginning to have a change of heart.
- Exhortations and greetings: Paul is brief and to the point. He calls them to aim for maturity and to give what he has said careful attention and reflection.

- Benediction: We see a clear reference to the person's of the Godhead: Son, Father and Spirit. If Jesus wasn't fully divine then it would be weird to have him listed with God the Father and Spirit. Also it would be weird to separate God the Father from the Spirit rather than just referencing the Son and the Father. In any case, it is clear from the texts in the New Testament that Jesus was viewed as a revelation of "God with us" and that this is clearly what Paul understands.
- Acts – Paul arrives in Greece: Here we have a concluding brief note about Paul's journey to Greece.