

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week One: The God Of All Comfort (2 Corinthians 1:1-11)**

After Paul wrote the first epistle to the Corinthians, some anxious months passed, both for the Corinthians and for the apostle. In the first epistle, Paul described some deep-rooted problems in Corinth, and many of the letter's recipients were unhappy about this. Paul himself was troubled, both from worry about the Corinthians' spiritual condition, and from concern that he may have hurt some of them unnecessarily. So his second epistle to them is full of emotion and sensitivity.

With many of the past problems still in his mind, the apostle writes back to the Corinthian church (1:1-2). His introduction is much briefer this time, for he wants to get to the heart of his letter quickly. In the first part of the epistle, Paul will step back somewhat from the troubles of the moment, to reflect on broader topics about our identity and purpose in Christ. This part of the epistle contains some of the New Testament's grandest descriptions of the gospel. Then, he will share his own feelings at great length, showing the depths of his humility and graciousness.

Running through Paul's thoughts is the awareness that genuine comfort and peace can come only from God (1:3-7). As believers in Jesus, we know this, but it is easy to forget when we most need to remember it. Implicit in Paul's comments is the truth that God must often allow his children to undergo times of sorrow, grief, or discouragement. Jesus promised to bring us life to the full - this means that Christians can appreciate and enjoy life's blessings more than others do; and it means that Christians feel the sorrows and pains of this life more keenly than others do.

"If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer." This simple yet profound statement cuts through all of the worldly logic that causes so many believers not to understand why unpleasant things often happen in this life. God's priority is not our short-term happiness, but the salvation of the soul. He wants us to experience oneness with him, even when it means we must forego things we long for in this earth.

Even though the Corinthians may not realize it, Paul's own life as a preacher of the gospel has been filled with trials (1:8-11). He does not mention this to get some kind of credit, but in order to promote mutual understanding. The Christian life is not one of constant fun or excitement; for when we deal with the real problems of real human beings, there will be sadness and struggle mixed in with the moments of encouragement and spiritual victory.

As so often in his epistles, the apostle asks for prayers and also offers them for others. His flesh is no stronger or more righteous than anyone else's, and he needs prayers as much as anyone. This is a reminder to us: this world can be tough on anyone; and every one of us will always be dependent on God's constant grace. This is true of us, and it is true of those we love. If we want to know the truth, then we shall accept this instead of arguing with God. If we really care about others, then we shall tell them the truth, instead of telling them what their flesh desires to hear.

*- Mark Garner, July 2011*

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### **Week Two: Yes In Christ (2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4)**

Before Paul can teach the Corinthians some spiritual principles, he must explain his own recent actions. He is not worried about their approval or agreement, but he knows it is important for them to understand his motivation. He had apparently changed his plans recently, intending to visit Corinth and then choosing instead only to continue his correspondence with them. He wants them to know that he did so with their spiritual well-being in mind.

To the best of his ability, Paul has acted in keeping with the principles of the gospel (1:12-14). The world's standards of logic and ethics do not determine the apostle's thoughts or actions. He does not try to impress them with his knowledge, but rather approaches them as a fellow sinner in equal need of grace. He does not try to convince them with worldly logic or fleshly motivation, but rather he speaks the truth always, whether it is what they want to hear or not.

Thus the apostle is honest about his change of plans (1:15-17). His original plan was not made for worldly purposes, and he did not change his mind for worldly reasons. This simple situation has a spiritual application. We are too often obsessed with correctness and perfection - when we make decisions, we panic over whether we are making the perfect choice; when we evaluate our congregation, our family, or our own lives, we are upset if we see any imperfection.

Imperfection and weakness are part of our lives in this world - they always will be, and this is what God expects. Paul changed his plans without a fuss, because he came to the simple realization that it would be better to do so. It did not upset him that his original plan turned out not to be perfect, and he did not worry about some abstract measure of 'correctness'. He just prayed, listened to God as best he could, and adapted himself when he realized he needed to.

Far more important than our actions or the actions of any one person, even an apostle, is to remember the perspectives of Jesus (1:18-22). It is Jesus who always cares and always knows what we need; it is Jesus who always says 'yes' to our souls' needs. There is nothing spiritual about expecting too much from ourselves or from others. We all need to know God, and we all need grace and wisdom from God. Our relationships with one another have a different purpose; and our relationships with one another will be much healthier if we have the right expectations.

So, Paul decided not to come to Corinth earlier because he knew that he could not, at that time, bring the Corinthians anything to meet the spiritual needs they had at that time (1:23-2:4). He knew that he was not their spiritual master - they needed to know God better, not to know the apostle better. When he first planned to come to Corinth, he thought that the time was right to repair his relationship with them. But then he realized that they had deeper spiritual needs that had to be addressed first - and seeing him prematurely might just have made things worse.

Once he saw this, he was neither hindered by false pride nor worried about possible criticism. He accepted that his original plan was not the best, and he moved on. The gospel isn't about us making agonizing choices between 'yes' and 'no', but about realizing that Jesus is always 'yes'.

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### **Week Three: Spiritual Confidence (2 Corinthians 2:5-3:5)**

Paul has had a complicated and sometimes painful relationship with the church in Corinth. To clear up any misunderstandings, he has explained some of the decisions he has recently made. As he moves onward, he offers additional comfort to those who felt hurt by what he had written them; and then he will start a broader discussion of perspectives on the ministry of the gospel.

After any conflict, even when one side is "right" and the other is "wrong", it is important for everyone to be merciful and gracious (2:5-11). When someone is hurt, it hurts just as bad whether he or she 'deserves it' or not. Jesus' perspective is to heal and comfort, not to blame and punish. And so Paul is especially concerned with the man whose outrageous sin had caused some of the worst problems in Corinth. Now that this person has changed, there is no reason to hold his past sin over his head. He needs comfort and healing as much as anyone does.

Even when Paul earlier had given stern instructions on dealing with this person, he was not filled with indignation and irritation, but with anxiety and uncertainty (2:12-13). The situation so weighed on him that he passed up an excellent opportunity to preach in Troas, because he was desperate to get a report on developments in Corinth. Even when Paul faced a believer doing something outrageously sinful, he was still unhappy about hurting him. Believers should never rejoice in punishment, whether for sinners or for criminals. Punishment is at best a regrettable necessity, and it is generally best left to God.

Despite constantly carrying these emotional burdens, Paul can still feel a constant sense of victory in Jesus (2:14-17). The victory is not in the results, but in the ability to live as Jesus lived, regardless of the results. To be "the aroma of Christ" is itself a victory and a blessing, of whether it is appreciated and effective or not. To rise above our worldly limitations and weaknesses, even for a moment, brings glory to God in ways that outward results in themselves do not. To draw closer to God himself is a greater blessing than anything of this earth can be.

Instead of worrying about producing results, we can just strive to be like Jesus. Those seeking Jesus - not seeking mere religion or activity - will be grateful. There are already countless churches that cater to human desires, hoping to exploit those desires to produce outward results. The person looking for human religion already has plenty of choices, and doesn't need more.

The apostle humbly accepts the knowledge that he can do nothing of spiritual value without God - indeed, he rejoices in knowing this (3:1-5). Even as he writes to the Corinthians, hoping that they will carefully consider what he says, he is not going to present himself as an expert or an authority. He loves the Corinthians and has shown them that he loves them - if this isn't enough, then Paul won't try to come up with some kind of arbitrary credential to show them.

Genuine spiritual confidence comes from knowing God and from accepting our dependence on him. We all have the same God, and can all have the same spiritual confidence, regardless of whether we have worldly talent, status, or power. "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27). So let those of us who are weak in this world rejoice.

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### **Week Four: The Gospel Unveiled (2 Corinthians 3:6-18)**

The trials that Paul and the Corinthians have gone through together have been painful, yet they illustrate valuable spiritual principles. Our misfortunes in life remind us of the difference between living by law and living by grace. Living by law always seems more natural, since that perspective is constantly reinforced by the world (and, at times, even by the church). Living by grace will always make the flesh feel uncomfortable, but it is far more satisfying to the soul.

In Christ, we have a covenant based on the Spirit, not on the law - and praise be to God that this is so (3:6). "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" - the law is perfect and holy in itself, but it can only correct, compare, and condemn; it cannot save or give life. "Sacrifices and offerings, burn offerings and sin offerings you did not desire" (Hebrews 10:8).

The entire Old Testament complex of laws, sacrifices, rituals, and rules never pleased God. It was never more than a temporary expedient - perfect for its purpose, but ready to be replaced as soon as that purpose was fulfilled. It is now to be discarded in its entirety - even the parts of it that our flesh finds pleasing - in favor of Christ, grace, and the gospel.

As undesirable as the Old Law was, it did come from God and thus came with glory - and so the New Covenant in Jesus' blood must be far more glorious (3:7-11). The old law was "the ministry that brought death", yet it left a glowing radiance on the face of Moses. The law could only condemn, yet it had to be treated with the utmost respect. Yet Paul is not saying that we should still honor the law, for we should indeed leave the law behind.

His point is different - since we honor and admire laws and "toughness", we ought to value grace and the gospel far more highly. The Levitical priests offered thousands of sacrifices, yet not a single sin was permanently forgiven - yet one death on a cross washed away an infinite number of sins. Believers can rigorously follow hundreds of laws and rules, yet never know God - but one act of love by Jesus brings us directly into his presence. Which merits our glory and praise?

Those who live by law - whether they do so openly, or whether they tell themselves that they live by grace "but we need a few rules" - are all placing a veil over the gospel, and are depriving the gospel of its power (3:12-15). The Israelites could not bear to see Moses' face when it displayed the radiance of God's presence. So too, the flesh today is still frightened of grace. Law just feels more comfortable to the flesh. But it is for our good that we pull away the veil of law and flesh.

We do not need to fear Jesus' ministry of grace; and when we see grace for what it really is, it takes away the 'veil' that hides the gospel's glory (3:16-18). As soon as we are humble enough to accept our need for grace, we can see the gospel's glory. As soon as we are compassionate enough to see that everyone shares this need in equal measure, regardless of worldly status, we then can see the gospel in its full, radiant glory.

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**Week Five: Treasure In Jars Of Clay (2 Corinthians 4:1-12)**

The gospel's most important teachings are often hidden by a veil of law and fleshliness. It is human nature to view the gospel as an earthly theory or method, and so Paul appeals to us to take away these "veils" so that we can see the glorious truth of the gospel. Then the good news of Jesus can live within us, becoming "treasure in jars of clay".

The nature of the gospel calls us to set aside manipulation, aggressiveness, and deceit (4:1-3). Because the gospel appeals to the soul rather than the fleshly mind, we shall often be tempted to use our own methods to persuade others to accept it, rather than allowing the gospel to speak for itself. This is neither necessary nor good. The gospel is so glorious, so full of wisdom and compassion, so true and convincing, that it never needs human "help".

We simply cloud the truth with our agendas, methods, and theologies. "If the gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing." Human methods cannot produce true repentance or humility - they produce superficial outward results, which do not lead to true spiritual change. Let us merely proclaim the truth - Jesus shed his blood for the sins of those who accept his grace.

The light of the gospel always shines, and those who seek God can see it (4:4-6). We should not tell those who have been blinded by "the god of this age" that the gospel is something that it is not. Now we can, by seemingly small distortions of the gospel, persuade others to "agree" with us or even to join our church, but this is not what they need. Lost souls need to see that by Jesus' blood they can know God.

Numerical growth and activity do not in themselves glorify God. Such things can be done entirely apart from the Spirit. God is glorified when a soul sees his grace and compassion, and is humbled to the point of putting full trust in Jesus' blood, without conditions or reservations.

Here, then, we have Paul's image of a great treasure being housed in a fragile, temporary vessel (4:7-9). It is inherent in the gospel's teachings that we are fragile, we are weak, we are fallible. So too, anything we do or create will have these qualities. It is thus self-contradictory when we try to include human methods or human reasoning in the gospel. But it is glorious when we can allow our mortal bodies simply to be filled with the Spirit of God and the grace of Jesus.

We glorify God far more by our humility and graciousness than we can ever glorify him with results or accomplishments. Jesus himself said he was glorified when he allowed himself to be crucified. He brought God glory, and lived in that glory, by completely surrendering his human body to God's will. Everything about God - his grace, his will, his truth - is a treasure.

In a more shocking image, the apostle talks of 'carrying' Jesus death with us (4:10-12). Now we do sometimes suffer in Jesus, but that is not exactly what he means here. This is a simpler death, a death that is painless except to our pride. It is the death of self, the death of our dreams of personal glory - and this kind of death brings life that will last.

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### **Week Six: Whether At Home Or Away (2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10)**

The gospel reveals glorious truths to a fallen world, and the more we appreciate its teachings, the more that we long for a home outside of this world. Yet from that point onward, we face a dilemma - we are in the world, but not of the world. Our souls already long for our eternal home, yet the flesh is still drawn by the temptations of this world. What can we do about this?

Anything worthwhile that we do or say flows naturally from faith in Jesus (4:13-15). His image of the vine and the branches (John 15) reminds us that remaining in him always produces fruit. We do not have to force ourselves to "bear fruit"; we need only make sure to remain in him. When we truly love Jesus, no one needs to tell us to do good things - in fact, they cannot stop us.

We betray a worldly mindset when we care more about the outward than we do about the inward. If someone does not know Jesus, then it does no good to teach them a program of outward behavior. Either they successfully follow our program, and feel a fleshly satisfaction that makes it harder truly to see God, or else they fail at our program, and henceforth confuse God with oppressive human methods. Both outcomes are spiritual disasters.

A key adjustment in our spiritual perspective comes when we start to seek the unseen, rather than the seen (4:16-18). This means that we not only stop chasing after crass material things or base sensual pleasures - we also give up our obsession with results, with controlling others, and with comparisons. Such things seem "spiritual" only to those who have never glimpsed the true glory of God without a veil of law and worldliness.

The flesh seeks the seen, but the soul seeks the unseen. The unseen will last forever, and it will satisfy us in a way that the seen cannot. Yet here too, if we think of "heaven" as a mere physical place, which we expect to be "fun" or pleasurable, then we can never understand why the unseen is such a treasure. Our eternal home with God will not merely be a more enjoyable version of earth. The real difference is that we shall be with God, we shall see his true nature, and indeed we shall share in that nature, no longer constrained by our mortal limitations.

The more we understand the gospel, the more we long to be joined once for all with God in eternity (5:1-5). "Meanwhile we groan"; and this groaning points us to God. All the things we think we need are really just reminders of our need for God. The things we fear are simply reminders of the hazards and imperfections of this world. Once we look past our distorted earthly values, we see much better how and why our unseen eternal home will be so much better.

Yet in Jesus we can also develop a genuine, spiritual confidence even while we remain here in this temporary world (5:6-10). This happens when "we live by faith, not by sight." True spiritual confidence does not come from believing that God will guarantee our success in everything now, but from knowing what the future holds for our souls, and from appreciating what a great blessing it is to know and love God.

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### **Week Seven: The Time Of God's Favor (2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2)**

The more we understand the gospel and its promises, the more we shall want to be with our Savior forever. Yet most of us will not hear God's call to come home just yet. So we must learn to adopt a new perspective on the persons, things, and events of this world. Even when we grasp the facts of Christianity, it is still easy to miss the real truths behind them.

It is inherent in the gospel that we are called to help others to see and know Jesus (5:11-13). It is unfortunate that we often see self-interested church leaders who distort this responsibility in order to dominate and manipulate others, yet it is still part of our calling that, "since we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men." So Paul clarifies the motivation for this.

Paul does not try to get the Corinthians to honor him personally, and he does not impose his own teachings or methods on them. He teaches them not to take pride (or to boast) in external things such as results, position, or talent, but to rejoice in the things of the heart. Paul acknowledges that he often seems to be 'out of his mind' (or 'beside himself'). This is because he cares so much about others, yet after teaching them he must allow them to make their own decisions about God.

It is vital to our spiritual perspective to be motivated by love alone (5:14-17). The use of guilt, fear, or manipulation is alien to the teachings of the gospel. "Christ's love compels us", and if that is not enough for us, then we ought to strive to know and appreciate Jesus more, instead of troubling others with human methodology, pretentious theology, or fleshly rules.

Jesus' grace reminds us not to look at others from a fleshly or worldly perspective. "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism" (James 2:1). Those who are unnoticed or ignored by the world mean a great deal to God. We are not here impress or gain favor with the influential or well-to-do. All souls and all needs matter equally to God. The powerful and wealthy are welcome in the church too - as long as they realize that their worldly status counts for nothing before God. We all start out new, as new creations in Jesus.

Teaching the gospel is a blessing, not a duty; it is a gracious opportunity, not a burdensome responsibility (5:18-21). This is why it is so sad when authoritarian church leaders presume to evaluate other believers and to boss them around in the name of "saving the lost". Those of us who know that Christ died for our sins become his representatives and ambassadors on this earth. Only if our lives reflect his grace, peace, and mercy can we truly help others to see him.

In this light we can better understand Paul's appeal not to receive God's grace and favor in vain (6:1-2). The Corinthians are already Christians, and have already had their sins forgiven. But, like many sincere believers, they still see Christianity in terms of rules and methods. Paul's appeal is not for them to become Christians, but for them to embrace the grace that defines everything in the gospel. It is time for them - and for us - to set aside fleshly ways of serving and worship, so that we and others can know the full measure of Jesus' grace and compassion.

*- Mark Garner, August 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Eight: Serving, Struggling, & Sharing (2 Corinthians 6:3-13)**

Because of the problems in the church at Corinth, there have been misunderstandings and hurt feelings in Paul's relationship with the Corinthians. So, besides helping them better understand their relationship with God, the apostle also wants to put their relationship with him on a more spiritual, healthy foundation. This will be a blessing to both sides, and will be pleasing to Jesus.

With being a follower of Jesus comes his call to reflect his grace and love in our lives (6:3-7). Although it is irrational and unfair when unbelievers hold the faults of human believers against Jesus, this is human nature; and they will always do so. Thus it is worth the effort for us to avoid acts of self-interest or insincerity, even when there is no rule or punishment to deter us.

It is out of love for Jesus and concern for others that Paul endures so many hardships and gives so much of his life to serving others. He willingly makes sacrifices that no one imposed upon him, because he loves Jesus and wants everyone to know Jesus' grace the way he has come to know it. He only mentions his personal sacrifices because some of them were made for the sake of the Corinthians - and he wants them to realize his commitment to their spiritual well-being.

The apostle also follows Jesus' example by not demanding that his own desires be met, and by not claiming any reward or special treatment (6:8-10). It is, again, human nature to want all our good deeds to be noticed and praised, and to want everyone else to understand and approve of what we think and do. But this luxury is not available to anyone whose first desire is to know God and help others to know God.

There is a great difference between the teachings and perspectives of the gospel and the viewpoints of the world. The difference has nothing to do with morality or theology. Followers of Jesus pursue peace, grace, and mercy; they give to those who do not deserve it; they bless those who hate them; they love those who do evil. We cannot practice these things without being misunderstood by the world, and without sometimes being scorned. So be it!

In Christian relationships, then, the values of the gospel of grace should also guide us. Even amongst ourselves, we cannot expect everyone always to appreciate everything we sacrifice or suffer. Even within the church, we simply do not have the time we would like to have for getting to know every believer deeply and closely. But we can instead show every believer grace and kindness. We can show every believer acceptance and support - even if we consider them "weak" or "erring". In fact, once you start treating other brothers and sisters in Christ in such a godly manner, you can see much better the wonderful ways God is working in all of them.

These ideas can help the Corinthians to repair their relationship with Paul, who had once been so close to them (6:11-13). Paul is offering them not new teaching, but added grace. He is giving them extra affection, not extra sermons or lectures. His example can strengthen our own spiritual friendships, too.

*- Mark Garner, August 2011*

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### **Week Nine: Come Out & Be Separate (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1)**

There is always a contrast in perspectives and hopes between those who trust in the gospel and those who live for this world's rewards. As long as we are in this world, this presents us with choices and challenges. While we have opportunities to help unbelievers to learn about Jesus and to come to faith in him, we also know that it is just as easy for us to become influenced by the world's values. This means that, in practice, it is impossible to come up with easy rules - we need instead to develop a perspective built on faithfulness and grace.

The perspectives and priorities of this world differ greatly from those of Jesus (6:14-16). Although Paul describes this difference with some strong language, the distinction is not between "good" persons and "evil" persons, but rather between the ways that believers think (or at least should think) compared with the attitudes and mindset of those who do not believe in the gospel of grace. The worldly cannot possibly grasp the true meaning of love, of faith, or of hope.

There is little sense in debating exactly what the apostle means by being "yoked together" (NIV) or "bound together" (NASB) with unbelievers. It could at times refer to marriage, business relations, political involvement, or any number of other things. The point, though, is not to make rules, but to help us develop the awareness that we cannot expect everyone to share the values of the gospel. We are no better than those who do not follow Christ, so we should not act as if we were. Yet those without Christ have no real hope, and we should not pretend that they do.

The apostle quotes from a number of Old Testament books, exhorting us to "come out from them and be separate" from the world (6:17-18). The reasons for this are clear, yet we must consider carefully what this might mean in practice. We will have to approach any specific situation on its own merits, so the only absolute we can establish is the perspective that we as believers can develop in our own minds.

If our hearts are set on obtaining wealth or glory in this world, then we are much more likely to be influenced by the worldly than they are to be influenced by us. If we think that it is important to get our way or to prove our point, then we will give in to sins like aggression, envy, and prejudice just as the worldly do. But if we clear our hearts of these things, and embrace only the grace, peace, and hope of the gospel, then we can be the ones whose attitudes influence others.

Being separate is primarily a matter of purifying ourselves, not shunning or showing hostility to unbelievers (7:1). This makes sense in view of the way that Jesus lived, and in view of the ways that the Christians in Acts lived around unbelievers. This involves sacrifices, but most of them are minor. Perhaps the hardest sacrifice we must make is our pride - because to practice what Paul teaches, we need to put the interests of others ahead of our own, by limiting our own fleshly indulgences without judging others for theirs. Yet isn't this what Jesus gladly did for us?

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### **Week Ten: Godly Sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:2-16)**

The necessity of bringing some of the Corinthians to repentance for their sensual indulgences was distressing and wearying for Paul. His way of dealing with sin, even the crude and selfish sins practiced in Corinth, is far from the misguided stereotype of the fiery-eyed preacher that is so often used to justify bellicose 'hard-line' treatment of those who struggle with sin. The apostle now explains at length the right reasons and the right ways to address the sins of other believers.

Addressing sin should never be an impersonal matter of laws or rules, and Paul always remembered that other believers are equal human beings (7:2-7). Paul's explanation of his actions never uses excuses or rationalizations like "we have to follow the rules" or "I'm only doing my job." He always remembers the personal side - he assures them that he never lost his affection for them, and for himself he asks only for understanding, not honor or obedience.

More than that, Paul's whole motivation and perspective focused on their well-being. He had agonized over what to say and when to visit them. He was desperately anxious about getting news from them - he was not interested in asserting authority, but in knowing whether he had helped them spiritually or whether he had made the situation worse. Unlike some church leaders who evaluate other believers based on their compliance with the leaders' own beliefs and projects, Paul just wants to do whatever he can to help them be stronger spiritually.

This episode also illustrates the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow (7:8-12). The world will always confuse outward emotion or frantic action with genuine caring, but we do not have to make this mistake. Worldly sorrow involves guilt, denial, or both; but godly sorrow involves a quiet resolve to draw closer to God and a desire to allow God's grace to help us to do what the flesh cannot do on its own.

Our interactions with each other may need at times to produce godly sorrow, but they should never be designed so as to produce worldly sorrow. Coercion, guilt motivation, and arbitrary rules may produce quick results, but these results will come from worldly sorrow. The only way to produce godly sorrow - and thus genuine repentance - is to keep returning to the cross and the gospel of grace. Jesus' love, sacrifice, and compassion are much better and healthier motivators than any of our worldly methods are.

And after all of the distress of addressing these issues, the personal well-being of the Corinthian Christians is still what matters most to Paul (7:13-16). Because Paul never set himself up as the ultimate authority, he and his associate Titus could rejoice in the changes in Corinth for the right reasons. The repentance and spiritual growth in Corinth pleased Paul simply because he cared about everyone, and because he wanted to see them draw closer to God and to become more appreciative of his grace. These things should motivate us, too, more so than our desire to control what others think and do.

*- Mark Garner, September 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Eleven: Grace, Trials, & Giving (2 Corinthians 8:1-12)**

Since the Christian lifestyle is based on grace, we shall often be called to make sacrifices and to undergo trials. Neither of these are punishments, and neither of these involve rules or laws. No one else will ever be able to judge whether we have 'given enough'. God himself will know whether we are giving to those in need. God realizes that it isn't always easy for us to adjust our minds from worldly viewpoints on giving to a more spiritual perspective.

When Paul mentions the surprising generosity of the churches in Macedonia (8:1-5), his purpose is not to make the Corinthians feel bad by comparing them with the Macedonians, but rather to remind them that it is possible to give and sacrifice even if someone does not have much in worldly terms. The amount of money given by the Macedonians is not as important as the fact that they willingly made sacrifices even though they had many needs of their own.

We often fondly quote Jesus' praise of the widow who donated two small coins to the temple treasury (Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4), yet we can forget to apply it. Jesus meant what he said: to him, the 'size' of a sacrifice does not matter as much as the heart behind it.

The apostle is hoping that the Christians in Corinth will learn to be generous with their material blessings (8:6-9). His approach to the subject does suggest that the Corinthian Christians were not particularly generous, and this should not surprise us in view of the other problems they had. Yet Paul motivates them entirely by positive means, not by guilt or fear. He reminds them of Jesus' example of selfless sacrifice, and he assures them that they too can be generous givers.

There are always all kinds of needs around us, both within the church and outside of the church. No one can meet them all, and no one should be expected to be a part of every conceivable ministry, no matter how important they all are. When we do feel that a ministry - whether the ministry of giving or something else - needs more attention, then we should always discuss it positively. We should always assume the best about our brothers and sisters in Christ, and no one should ever treat others as subordinates or inferiors.

Paul then re-emphasizes that giving should be done for its own sake, and for its own value, without regard to comparisons with others (8:10-12). In a sense, this is a matter of faith. The worldly perspective on giving and sacrifice centers around what we believe that we need, whereas God's perspective focuses on the giving heart that thinks of others. The world praises large gifts by millionaires who will never miss the money, but Jesus values the real acts of giving by those who have plenty of worries and struggles of their own.

Our perspective should be the same. "If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones . . . he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42). We would do far better to appreciate and encourage all those who give (whether of their money or their time), instead of lamenting the additional things we wish they were doing.

*- Mark Garner, September 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Twelve: Grace, Giving, & Equality (2 Corinthians 8:13-24)**

In his discussion of giving, Paul does not want to keep harping on the need to give, but rather to help us understand why God asks us to give generously. God is more than powerful enough to give directly to those in need without the necessity of relying on us - so if he asks us to give, then there are probably reasons that go beyond the needs themselves.

Giving reminds us that we are all truly equal in Jesus (8:13-15). "At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality . . ." (verse 14). We have different needs at different times. No one is truly self-sufficient, for we all depend on each other in many ways every day, whether we admit it or not.

Most of all, every one of us stands in equal need of God's grace. By grace he gives each of us the things we have in this life, and by grace he forgives each of us our sins, so that we can live with him in the next. All that we have, whether spiritual or material, is by his grace. So we never have reason to claim superiority, and we should never be either grudging or self-congratulatory when we give to others. All we can ever do is share what God freely gives us.

Christian giving should not put a worldly emphasis on the numbers, but rather should emphasize God's grace at all times, so that the world can see God's heart and not just our dollars (8:16-21). Paul mentions Titus and another unnamed believer as being especially eager to help Christians to help one another. Their enthusiasm and compassion mean more to God than any stack of money could in itself. And when we - who are much wealthier - give to one another, God values our care and concern even more than our banknotes.

Paul goes out of his way to emphasize this, so that no one will feel either guilt or self-righteousness in response to his request to give. We, too, would do well to learn to be appreciative of those who give willingly - whether of their time, their money, or their encouragement - instead of focusing on whatever they are not doing. Once we take our minds off of the arbitrary expectations and fleshly 'standards' that we set for others, then we can see all of the ways that God is glorified by the humblest and least noticeable believers.

When we pursue giving as a ministry of God's grace, rather than an activity of fleshly finances or a display of self-righteous piety, then we can bring glory to God while encouraging others (8:22-24). Paul again uses Titus and his unnamed companion as an example, because they are simply happy to be able to do something that helps someone else. They have made themselves "an honor to Christ"; and Paul knows that the Corinthian Christians can do this as well.

Paul would not have asked the Corinthians to give unless he knew that they could do it. That is why he is not evaluating them on performance or numbers, but in terms of their love and their joy in giving. This perspective can help put a lot of other things in a new light, too.

*- Mark Garner, September 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Thirteen: Sowing & Reaping (2 Corinthians 9)**

The Corinthians were not especially generous in giving to those in need, so Paul spends a great deal of time on the call to give, the needs that giving meets, and the reasons God asks us to give even when we have our own worries. Yet Paul uses none of the common human tactics to "get them" to give: no guilt manipulation, no authoritarian commands, no appeals to fleshly vanity. He deals with the entire matter of giving on the basis of God's grace and our spiritual well-being.

Christian giving only means something if it is done voluntarily and gladly (9:1-5). Paul has been telling his friends in Macedonia - a poverty-stricken region - that the Corinthians would be happy to contribute generously to the needs of others. But the ongoing problems in Corinth made Paul anxious about this, and he almost seems to be asking them for re-assurance. But in any case he is clear that he wants their giving to be done gladly, not as an obligation or a painful duty.

If the apostle cared only about numerical results, then he would not discuss this in such detail - he would just 'command' the Corinthians to give. But he cares about their hearts. He knows that it will not be good for them spiritually to give under pressure; and he knows that this would not truly encourage anyone else either. In giving as in other areas of ministry, it is always important for us to look beyond the outward results, for these are rarely what matters most.

At the same time, the apostle explains that giving does meet an important spiritual need in our souls, which cannot be met in any other way (9:6-11). The principle that we sow in accordance with what we reap is present throughout the Bible. In the old covenant, the people were explicitly told that faithfulness would lead to prosperity, while disobedience would lead to ruin - and this is still true, though never in the crass sense in which it is so often mis-applied.

Faithfulness may or may not bring us extra money or popularity - this is not what the promise means. Faithfulness does definitely help us to enjoy and appreciate whatever blessings God gives us. Likewise, opposing God may or may not lead directly to financial loss or other problems - again, this is not what the warning means. But sin always makes it harder to enjoy what we have. All this is for the same reason: whatever we have is by grace, so the more we accept this, the more we appreciate what we have and do not complain about what we lack.

God loves cheerful givers both for their own sake and because cheerful givers also make cheerful recipients. When we cling grudgingly to our material blessings and refuse to share them, then we can never appreciate how much we have. When we give generously and take pleasure from seeing others get what they need, then we shall also feel our own blessings more fully.

Paul reminds us that the ministry of giving can be a joy to all concerned if (but only if) it is practiced through God's grace and with a willing heart (9:12-15). When we turn giving into a competition or a solemn obligation, then it discourages everyone involved. But when it is done freely and voluntarily, "thanks be to God for his indescribable gift."

*- Mark Garner, September 2011*

**OVERFLOWING GRACE:  
LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

**Week Fourteen: Looking Beneath the Surface (2 Corinthians 10:1-11)**

After addressing personal matters, and discussing at length his hope for the Corinthians to give generously to the work of the gospel, Paul turns to more general thoughts. Paul feels a kind of dual identity - he is a flesh-and-blood person with weaknesses and desires; yet he is also a soul forgiven by the blood of Christ, who strongly feels the responsibility that comes from this. So he wants to help others to see how our earthly nature and our spiritual identity fit together.

It is common for both believers and unbelievers to misunderstand the nature of boldness and courage (10:1-2). The genuine qualities have nothing to do with volume or with fleshly swagger, and they certainly have nothing to do with aggression or confrontation. True boldness and courage combined seamlessly with meekness and gentleness in Jesus. There is no inconsistency in his nature - those who are truly bold and courageous are able to be gentle, gracious, and compassionate, because they have no need to control or dominate others.

The Corinthians had wrong expectations of Paul, expecting him to engage in a battle of wills with them the way that many fleshly leaders do. But those who feel a need to bend others to their will are neither courageous nor bold. It does not matter what euphemisms or earthly logic we use to justify manipulative tactics, for they can never be consistent with the gospel.

In Jesus, the most important events take place on a spiritual level, which is less tangible yet more significant than the physical world (10:3-6). To follow Jesus, we have to stop fighting about the things the world fights about, we have to stop using the methods that the world uses, and we have to stop seeking the kinds of results that the world values.

The worldly are unable to put their desires and opinions into a proper perspective, and so in their foolish debates they become aggressive, angry, and hurtful. But it is not only their means that are misguided, because they invariably argue and compete about things that do not even come close to meeting anyone's real needs anyway. Only in Christ can we rise above the superficial, selfish, emotional concerns that dominate the thinking of the world and its opinion-makers.

Unfortunately, we often do no better. We become just as agitated when we do not get our way, we feel just as determined to force our opinions on others, we just as wrongly think that we have absolute truth on our side. We need to replace these worldly attitudes with pure graciousness, compassion, and gentleness - even if the church provides us with its own set of bad examples.

Paul uses himself as an example of the need to look beneath the surface (10:7-11). Some believers had a false image of him as a fire-breathing authoritarian - and indeed there are those in the church today who erroneously use Paul in defense of this kind of "leadership". But Paul says that he only has "the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down." Indeed, we all have the 'authority' to encourage and love others without limit.

*- Mark Garner, September 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Fifteen: Boasting In The Lord (2 Corinthians 10:12-18)**

The need to look beneath the surface applies to all that we do, and it calls us to develop a new and godly perspective on our lives and on the lives of others. God wants us to be filled with joy and with godly confidence, but not on the misguided terms on which the world seeks these things. The logic of the gospel does not correlate with the logic of any human school of philosophy, politics, or religion - the gospel refutes them all.

The compulsion of human beings to make comparisons amongst themselves is universal, yet it is spiritually damaging (10:12). There is a lot of worldly logic that can be used to justify making comparisons amongst Christians, in the name of "motivation" or "encouragement" - but the apostle ends the discussion by saying simply that when we make comparisons "we are not wise." Only God knows what a given believer can do, and only God knows what we are really like inside where it counts.

The Scriptures give examples of faithful, obedient believers whose lives had little effect on the faithless persons around them; and they give examples of stubborn or hard-hearted persons accomplishing their goals. Since everything in Christian living and Christian ministry comes by grace, worldly standards and logic will always lead to erroneous, and often fleshly, conclusions. Instead of making comparisons amongst ourselves, we all ought to remain humble and gracious.

Although humility is one of the greatest virtues in Christianity, there is a form of 'boasting' that is still appropriate (10:13-15). Note that Paul uses this word in an ironic sense - he does not justify the kind of attention-grabbing self-promotion that the world loves, even if it is done in the name of ministry. Rather, he encourages us to take satisfaction in finding something that we can do to give to others in the name of Jesus. We do not 'boast' of results or talent or righteousness, but rather we speak of how blessed it is when God graciously gives us a worthwhile ministry.

This is what the apostle means by confining his 'boasting' to 'proper limits' - we give the praise and attention to God, not to our own genius or goodness. The irony is that this actually produces a truer and deeper sense of self-worth than do any of the world's hokey teachings that base self-image and self-esteem on pop psychology and wishful thinking.

It is easier to see the ways that these ideas should affect us if we seek to be commended and accepted first by God, rather than seeking first the approval of the world (10:16-18). Here is where it can get pretty difficult for us, because even in matters of ministry and the church we have a strong tendency to seek the kinds of tangible results that the world values, rather than trying to help one another to seek and find God personally.

We are not called to promote ourselves, and it is unwise to seek confidence through comparisons or slogans. But when we determine to follow the principle that, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord," we then can experience genuine confidence and joy.

*- Mark Garner, September 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Sixteen: An Apostle & A Servant (2 Corinthians 11:1-15)**

Despite our appreciation for Paul today, in his own time he was often disregarded or scorned, even by believers. He might face the same problem today, for it is human nature to admire the superficial. And there was nothing superficial about Paul, despite some of the ways he is portrayed. He was no authoritarian, and he did not fixate on outward results. He was a flawed person like all of us, but he allowed God to speak and act through him, allowing him to do and say things far beyond his own abilities.

In his own lifetime, Paul's reputation often suffered from being compared with more ambitious, more 'professional' persons who claimed to speak for God (11:1-6). Now, it is not at all a problem to be skilled at speaking or to have any other talent. But it is a problem when those who have such blessings use them to turn Jesus into a rallying point for their own ambitions. Those who consider themselves superior often create a new Jesus in their image, rather than being content with the one who actually lives.

Paul refers to such persons as "super-apostles" (to translate his phrase literally). Today too, believers have a weak spot for strong-willed, self-confident preachers who claim to have all the answers and who promise to teach us how to get what we desire. Neither Jesus nor Paul could stop this, and neither of them made any attempt to compete with such persons. Neither should we. It doesn't matter what kind of excitement or results we might 'miss out on' by not following them. Pray for them, and let them go their own way.

In fact, Paul has made every effort to go in the opposite direction, never claiming any privileges or rights because of his apostleship (11:7-12). When he was with the Corinthians, he allowed himself to be perceived as a weakling who was dependent on others, and yet he also accepted no financial support from the church in Corinth. He "resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), even though this put him at a disadvantage against louder preachers who peddled methods or slogans.

Paul had these problems because even believers cannot always easily distinguish those who speak on God's behalf from those who use God to pursue their own ambitions (11:13-15). Believers in Jesus tend to be generally trusting and faithful, and yet this also makes them vulnerable. Worse, this vulnerability can lead them to establish false loyalties to strong-willed leaders, which in turn can transform well-meaning, sincere believers into aggressive Pharisees.

The solution, though, is not to become aggressive or hostile in return. The only solution is to continue to follow in the simple, gracious paths of Christ. Only by intimately knowing his grace, his sacrifice, and his resurrection can we avoid being drawn into the world's hostile debates and competitive agendas. Those who simply and truly follow Christ will never receive the level of attention or recognition that is given to the ambitious or the assertive. But then, when Jesus walked the earth, no one ever fully appreciated him either - should we expect better?

*- Mark Garner, October 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Seventeen: Paul's Weaknesses (2 Corinthians 11:16-33)**

Despite the stereotypes of Paul that we have today, he was far from the image that many believers have of a strong, 'bold' leader who accomplishes results by the force of his personality. In this passage, he even "boasts" about being the opposite - a patient, sacrificial servant who puts up with mistreatment and suffering because he knows that the gospel is more important than his personal achievements and plans.

Human nature mistakenly perceives meekness as weakness, and aggression as strength - but the spiritual reality is exactly the opposite (11:16-21a). Paul calls assertive, authoritarian leaders "fools", because he knows that this style of leadership is incompatible with the gospel. Yet he has to remind the Corinthian Christians that they have often been attracted to that very kind of 'leader', and because of this they have often ignored what Paul tried to teach them.

Yet it is Paul who was genuinely strong. Those who are close to Jesus do not feel compelled to correct everyone else, and they are able to continue patiently with the ministries God gave them, even if others are not. This is the strength of Christ - to be gracious and giving without judging, without giving up, without causing division.

Even the many sufferings in Paul's life came about because he humbly allowed himself to be harmed, rather than jeopardizing the spiritual well-being of others by putting himself first (11:21b-27). Paul lists a wide variety of dangers he has faced and torments he has endured, to remind the Corinthians of his willingness to endure hardships as Jesus did. Jesus did not seek out a haven where he would always be respected and admired - he sought out those who needed him instead. He did not provoke persecution, but he often humbly faced it.

Believers are called neither to provoke mistreatment nor to recoil from it. Deliberate confrontation and hostility towards the world are inappropriate; avoiding those who think differently is equally inappropriate. A follower of Jesus will love everyone, whether good or evil in the world's eyes; but a follower of Jesus will also not be surprised if the world does not appreciate our graciousness and peacefulness.

Some of Paul's greatest strengths as a follower of Jesus could be interpreted by the worldly as signs of weakness (11:28-33). When other believers sinned, he agonized over it inside, instead of lashing out at them. When he himself was in danger, he did not try to be heroic, but allowed others to look after him, even to the extent of humiliating himself by being hidden in a basket.

There is nothing spiritual or strong about pride. There is nothing spiritual about trying to save the world all by ourselves; and there is nothing spiritual about bossing other Christians around, regardless of the reason. Leave these things to the worldly, and instead allow Jesus' grace and humility to transform you from the inside. Then you will not need to imitate the false toughness of others - you will have the genuine inner strength of Jesus, and can help others to find it, too.

*- Mark Garner, October 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Eighteen: My Grace Is Sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)**

We now come to one of the best-known passages in 2 Corinthians. Paul was in many ways uniquely blessed spiritually, and yet he suffered a great deal as well. In particular, his "thorn in the flesh" tormented him constantly, and not even fervent prayer could persuade God to remove it. This was to teach him that God's grace was all-sufficient, and it is also to teach us to rely on grace alone, not on having the things of this world the way we desire them to be.

Paul has been indulging in some ironic 'boasting', emphasizing that he has nothing that does not come entirely by grace (12:1-6). When he speaks of some of the unusual spiritual experiences he has had, he even speaks of himself as if he were a neutral observer, to make sure that we know that he was given these experiences by grace, not because he is better than anyone else.

What he shares is indeed remarkable - a kind of transcendent experience in which he was allowed to glimpse eternal things that he cannot even describe properly with human language. In some sense - the apostle does not pretend to understand the literal mechanics - he was allowed to leave earth and see into heaven. (The "third heaven" is merely an old expression for what we just call "heaven" - the first two 'heavens' used to be considered to be the components of the physical universe.) How would we respond if we had such an experience?

We would boast and blabber about it endlessly - that's what we would do. We would write books about it, speak at length about it, and generally bore other persons to tears with it, instead of privately and humbly giving thanks to God for such an undeserved gift.

Even Paul may have been tempted to do this, because he knows that God needed "to keep me from being conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations" (12:7). This is the origin of his thorn in the flesh (a literal translation of the original text). No one knows what exactly the "thorn in the flesh" may have been, and it does not matter in the least. Yet this does not stop presumptuous commentators from presenting their labored theories - after all, if they are reeling off irrelevant factoids to prove their view, then they don't have to deal with the powerful lesson that this passage actually teaches.

Whatever this agonizing affliction may have been, Paul quite naturally wanted to be released from it - but God would not take it away (12:8-10). "My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness." Our very weaknesses and afflictions testify to God's greater wisdom, strength, and (especially) grace. God does not have to solve all our problems or answer all our questions for us to trust and believe in him.

"That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses ... For when I am weak, then I am strong." The gospel is not compatible with human ambitions or results-oriented thinking. When we are weak and know that we are weak, we allow God's grace to overcome our innate pride and stubbornness. And it is when we can accept our own weaknesses that we become sensitive towards the weaknesses of others. Jesus loves the weak, and indeed he died for us.

*- Mark Garner, October 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Nineteen: The Third Visit (2 Corinthians 12:11-21)**

Paul approaches his coming trip to Corinth with a mixture of anxiety, hope, and emotion. As he concludes his thoughts on the personal relations between him and the Corinthians, he also appeals to them to clear away any distrust or secrecy that may remain in their own hearts. Paul knows that no good spiritual relationship can be based on one side having superiority or authority, so he wants to be able to see the Corinthians without such questions lingering.

The apostle emphasizes his constant desire to serve and give, not to exploit them or to order them around (12:11-13). It makes him sad that the Corinthians are more attracted to the authoritarian "super-apostles", and yet he can do nothing except to continue to love and serve them sincerely. Paul does not claim authority based on credentials or results - he can only ask that they remember his selfless sacrifices and his devotion to the truth, and that they listen to him for these reasons alone.

Notice how much it troubles Paul that some of the Corinthians suspect him of having a hidden agenda (12:14-18). Paul knows his own heart, of course; and he normally does not worry about what others think or say about him. And it is the very extent of his selfless love for the Corinthian Christians that has allowed them to treat him with disdain and callousness. But the one thing he cannot bear is to be suspected of exploiting the gospel for his own profit.

The Corinthians have allowed themselves to be manipulated and exploited by the self-seeking "super-apostles", for they could not see through the agendas of these authoritarian teachers; but Paul's selfless, sacrificial approach to ministry baffled them, so they questioned it. It has always been human nature to develop a false admiration for the strong-willed and the self-promoting, and to be uncomfortable with the truly selfless. Yet here too, Paul willingly endured this because he trusted in God's grace - and because he knew how much grace he himself needed.

Despite all the emotions that Paul is battling, his greatest concern is for the spiritual well-being of the believers in Corinth (12:19-21). Though he is talking about himself, he is in fact neither promoting himself or defending himself - indeed, if were doing this, he would have chosen an entirely different set of things to emphasize. But the Corinthians' lack of regard for Paul is a symptom of a larger spiritual problem, and the apostle does care about this.

The forceful "super-apostles" have taught the Corinthians to associate truth with loudness and assertiveness. Because of this, the Corinthians have ignored Paul's pleadings for them to be more sensitive towards one another. He calls them to stop indulging in gossip, factions, and arguments. But the strong-willed actually think these sins to be positive things, because to them Christianity is about winning debates and getting their own way.

Where are we? Are we like the "super-apostles", whose craving for significance and results made them hardened and competitive? Or are we like Paul, willing even to endure slander and disdain for the love and grace of Christ?

*- Mark Garner, October 2011*

## **OVERFLOWING GRACE: LESSONS FROM THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS**

### **Week Twenty: Examine Yourselves (2 Corinthians 13)**

The epistle closes with a request to examine ourselves. There is a common, unhealthy kind of worldly self-examination that is all too common even in the church, but there is a proper kind of spiritual self-examination that can be healthy. This closing chapter can give us useful insight on what we, too, should and should not examine in ourselves.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Word of God has a power of its own, and does not depend on who speaks it or teaches it (13:1-4). The apostle is distressed at the way the Corinthians insist on some kind of dramatic proof or arbitrary credential that Paul is speaking the Word of God. In return, his warnings to them are not a declaration of judicial authority, but a caution that even someone meek - as Paul was in person - should be heeded when speaking the Word of God.

It is human nature to have undue respect for volume, emotion, and forcefulness, and to confuse these things with the truth. In reality, a person's conviction, loudness, or passion have nothing at all to do with whether that person speaks the truth. Our respect should be for the Word of God itself, and when our practices or beliefs are contrary to his Word, we should not be concerned if he chooses even the most fallible vessel to point this out.

The apostle's call to "test yourselves" means no more and no less than to ask whether Jesus Christ is in us (13:5-6). In other words, our spiritual standing does not depend on what we have accomplished or even on what we know - it simply depends on whether we want to know Jesus and desire to allow him to live in us. To "fail the test" does not mean that we fall short in some area of performance or knowledge, or even that we have sinned - he is just urging us not to confuse the gospel with some kind of human program or institution.

Even in suggesting this idea, Paul is uncomfortable with the ways that it might be used, and so he tries to clarify what he means (13:7-10). Paul is never concerned about outward appearances - he does not want the Corinthians to worry about whether others think they have "passed the test", and he is always willing to allow others to think less of him. His call to self-examination involves our perspectives, not our outward performance.

The apostle describes his authority as, "the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down." This explains much of Paul's ministry, for he was always willing to do anything that would instill in others a positive view of God and an appreciation of his grace, over and above outward results. Today's church 'leaders' would do well to discard their worldly leadership philosophies and tactics, and to adopt this same self-sacrificing viewpoint. A true spiritual leader claims no responsibility at all, seeing his or her role as one of responsibility only.

Paul's simple closing emphasizes peace and completeness, or "perfection" - meaning that nothing is lacking, not referring to flawlessness (13:11-14). If we truly understand the gospel, then our motivation will be to draw together, to break down barriers, and to set aside our own ambitions and preferences. We may often be misunderstood; and we shall often fail to "get our way". Nothing is wrong with this - we are simply following in the footsteps of Jesus himself.

*- Mark Garner, October 2011*