

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 46

II Corinthians – Part Two Chapters 5:11-9:15

I. BACKGROUND

The earlier lesson on Second Corinthians provides background information on the book/letter itself. That information is not repeated here. Similarly, the overview lesson on First Corinthians provides the information about the town of Corinth. That information is not repeated here either.

For introduction to this week's lesson, we consider some of what makes this letter so personal **to** Paul and so personal **about** Paul. One scholar has noted, "If you want to really get to know Paul, spend time in Second Corinthians."¹

Why is that so? Think about it. You see more deeply into a person when he/she is under attack and responds to critics. In Second Corinthians, Paul spends a great deal of time defending himself from a variety of assaults. We do not have the benefits of reading or hearing the negative material circulating about Paul and his ministry, but by using a bit of deduction, we easily learn some of what his adversaries said.

Reading both letters together gives a good bit of insight into those things that hurt Paul and caused Paul to write as he did. We know that Paul felt a fatherly role to the church itself (1 Cor. 4:15). We also know that Paul established the church and stayed there longer than he had at any other church at the time, save his "home" church at Antioch (Acts 18; 1 Cor. 3:6). After Paul left, the Corinthians received teaching from others, some godly, some not necessarily so (Acts 18:27; 2 Cor. 11:3-6; 13-15). The result of these other teachings left the church divided in loyalty and doctrine (1 Cor. 1:10-12). The church had serious problems with some believing they were superior to others in the church and to Paul himself (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). Paul confronted these problems in letters and made a painful, quick visit to Corinth that caused Paul and the Corinthians grief (2 Cor. 2:2). Paul never wrote off the church; Paul kept reaching out in pain and love. Paul tried teaching the church correct doctrine and practice,

¹ Conversation with Charles Mickey.

while confronting his critics.

Out of this turmoil emerges 2 Corinthians in which Paul defends himself, as well as his ministry, his lifestyle, and his apostleship. Yet, as Paul gives this defense, he does so recognizing that God is his ultimate defense. In this way, 2 Corinthians provides insight into a man who feels compelled to defend himself and his ministry, but who also accepts the suffering and slander that comes to followers of a suffering and slandered Messiah.

Last week, we reviewed some of this in the first 5 chapters of 2 Corinthians. This week and next week, we will see this defense played out more fully as we finish the letter.

II. THE TEXT

A. *A Ministry of Reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:11-6:13)*

Paul spent the first 4 1/2 chapters speaking of his plans with the Corinthians, his suffering, his new covenant message, and the bodies of clay we now live in, and the heavenly bodies that await us in glory. Paul explains that we have a new covenant of glory written on our hearts. Paul then takes this teaching about Christ in us (the new covenant written on our hearts) and the promise of a glorious resurrection body that awaits believers, and he applies it to his teaching and ministry.

Paul writes that his motivation for teaching – and his motivation for a plain and transparent life – is the fear/awe Paul has for the Lord. Paul lives his life to convey the truth of a crucified Messiah to men. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know he was not writing out of pride. Paul is not “trying to commend” himself to the Corinthians “again” (5:12) which was evidently something he had been accused of earlier. Apparently, some opposing Paul were proudly following those with “good visibles” (rich teachers? handsome teachers?) as opposed to proudly following Paul and those with good hearts!

Evidently, the charges against Paul go beyond his physical and material shortcomings. Some have even charged that Paul was out of his mind! So, Paul explains that if he and his companions are indeed “out of our mind, it is for the sake of God!” If, however, Paul is in his right mind, which no sane person should dispute, then

all Paul's actions are "for you [the Corinthians]" (5:13).

What was driving Paul? Christ's love for Paul and for all of us compelled Paul. Christ's love could never be clearer. The love was not merely spoken with words. Nor was it shown in simple affection or gifts. The love of Christ was demonstrated in this world by the ultimate sacrifice – a physical death and resurrection. Christ for us. Christ in our stead. That love pushes Paul to do all he could to proclaim to mankind the love of mankind's Savior.

Paul never viewed people or the world the same again. The world had been alienated from God, but could be reconciled through Christ. This was a real event that had happened in Paul's lifetime. There were hundreds of witnesses, including Paul himself. This is why Paul saw a new creation in Jesus Christ of all believers. The old covenant was gone, but so was the old life.

We live in a reconciled state of closeness to our God. As God, through Christ, was reconciling the world to himself, Paul was an ambassador through whom God made an appeal to men. Paul had a ministry of reconciliation, bringing the truth to people that a direct relationship with God was possible. People could now have sins forgiven, renewed with God's unblemished righteousness. Paul was excited that God's day of salvation spoken of in Isaiah 49:8 had arrived (5:16 – 6:2).

This profound action of God among mankind moved Paul. Paul would minister and speak freely to the Corinthians to convey the wonderful truth of what God did in Christ and what it meant to humanity. Paul's hardships paled in comparison to his participating in seeing God's salvation bearing fruit in believers. So Paul gladly endured "troubles, hardships and distresses, beatings, imprisonment and riots; hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger" (6:5).

Paul was first and foremost God's servant. Those who would discredit him would discredit his Master, God. Paul was God's servant in the face of the hardships, but also in his "purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report" (6:6-8).

Paul was almost the opposite of how he was being portrayed. Paul was “genuine, yet regarded an imposter; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet living on; beaten and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (6:8-10). This explanation and answer to his critics could only grow out of deep conviction in the truth of Paul’s mission and message.

B. The Holiness of Believers (2 Cor. 6:14-7:2)

After this defense, Paul seems to pause and adjust to a slightly different subject. This may be one of the places where Paul put his pen down for a week, or maybe a month, picking it up at a later time to write on something else that has occurred to him. He writes of the necessity of separateness between believers and unbelievers.

We understand this section a bit more if we note the meaning of the word “holy.” The Greek for “holy” is *agios* (*hagios*). Its meaning echoes that of the Hebrew word for “holy”, (*qodesh*). Both words strongly convey the idea of “separateness” in the sense of someone or something that was set apart. For example, certain people set apart for God’s service in the Old Testament were considered “holy.” In fact, the Jewish nation itself carried the term “holy” because it was a nation chosen by God, set apart from the other nations (Dt. 7:6). Even the Sabbath day was set apart as different from the other days, and hence was called “holy” (Gen. 2:3). These were “holy” because they were not “common,” but were separated from the common for dedicated and special use before God.

This is why the church and we believers are called to be holy. We are not your average fallen humans! We are set apart for God’s service. The Holy Spirit dwells within us. We have within us Christ, our assurance of glory. And, so we are unique as a people among the nations of the world. We are holy!

Paul writes that as holy people, set apart from others, separated for God, as his children, as his dwelling place on earth, we are to live differently. We are not to be “yoked together with unbelievers.”²

² This is a passage that is easily taken out of context by some to justify an “isolationist Christianity” where there is as little interaction with the world as possible. That is not a fair construction for two reasons. It loses the balance inherent in the immediate context itself. It is our unique calling and restored relationship that separates us from others. That results in a

Light and darkness do not dwell together, so we are to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit.” We are to perfect being set apart for God (i.e. “holiness”) out of our reverence for God who dwells within us and makes us separate (holy) (6:14-7:1).

C. *Paul’s Joy and Stewardship (2 Cor. 7:2-9:15)*

In chapter 7, Paul again returns to the theme of defending himself in the face of attacks we can no longer hear directly, but can still clearly understand by the nature of Paul’s defense. Paul writes that he has neither wronged nor exploited anyone. Paul is careful in writing his defense that the Corinthians understand that he is not scolding those who support him. In fact, he is greatly encouraged by them and would willingly die for them (7:2-4).

At this point in Paul’s writing, Titus has returned to him with encouraging news of how the Corinthians feel and care for him. Paul understood from Titus that his last letter hurt some Corinthians. While Paul writes that he feels badly about hurting them, he was happy that the Corinthians’ sorrow led to repentance. Paul explains that godly sorrow can lead to wonderful, life-changing things for a Christian. Their sorrow produced an earnestness to clear themselves, an eagerness to make things right, an alarm to issues, and a desire to see justice done. This reaction encouraged Paul (7:8-13).

Titus himself was also encouraged and delighted at the Corinthians’ response to Titus and Paul’s message. Titus grew in affection from his time at the church (7:13-16).

Paul then addresses the issue of the Corinthian contributions for the work of the saints. Jerusalem and its surrounding area were severely famine-stricken. Food was very expensive. Paul used this famine and the resulting starvation to bring funds from Gentiles in to the home Jewish church. No doubt this helped unite both giver

different lifestyle, yes, but not isolation. As Paul has already written, we are the aroma of Christ to those outside the church. Jesus taught the same when he taught that we were the salt of the earth. We preserve and flavor the world in the name of Christ. We are a light set on a hill, not because we are to be isolated from the world, but because we are what they see shining in the midst of the world’s darkness. Jesus sent us into the world to proclaim his message. It is the balance between being in the world for God’s purposes but not being of the world and its purposes.

(Gentile) and receiver (Jew) in Christ. For this contribution, the Macedonians (from where Paul was writing) were freely giving to God out of extreme poverty with overflowing joy (8:1-5). Paul wants the Corinthians to follow through on earlier commitments and similarly give earnestly to the work. Paul reminds the Corinthians of Jesus' giving. As God, Jesus was rich, but he became poor on our account so we could become rich in our eternal destiny (8:6-15).

Titus was returning to Corinth to collect the remaining gifts, and Paul emphasizes that the money is being handled VERY carefully so neither God nor man could question or criticize how the gift was used (8:16-24).

As Paul explains his heart on this issue of giving, he adds an important admonition:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” (9:6-8)

This passage is worth more than a passing reading. This passage has several truths at its core. First, everything is God's. Anything we have, we have as a result of his blessings. Second, God does much of his work through the church. What he has given us is not for OUR purposes, but for HIS. Third, when we give to him and his works, we should give with joy, recognizing that what we give is what he entrusted to us. He gave it to us for us to use and give as HE sees fit. So, we are to give and watch him use not only what we give, but also the right attitude with which we give. Those who give generously and cheerfully are those to whom God can entrust more. God entrusts more because those are people who will use the greater sums for HIS purposes as well.

This passage is not teaching a blind “give to the Lord so you can get richer!” The goal is not getting richer. The goal is being a trustworthy vessel God can use to get his work done. By the same token, Paul recognized and PRECEDED this passage with his clear conviction of his obligation to handle the gifts rightly before God

AND man. Paul never used this teaching as a means to enrich himself or his lifestyle. Paul counted it an honor to live for God in want.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. People may hurt us.
2. But Christ Loves Us.
3. Let His Love Motivate Us.
4. We Are Set Apart for God.
5. Grow in the Midst of Sorrow.
6. Take Stewardship Seriously, It is a Joy/Honor.