



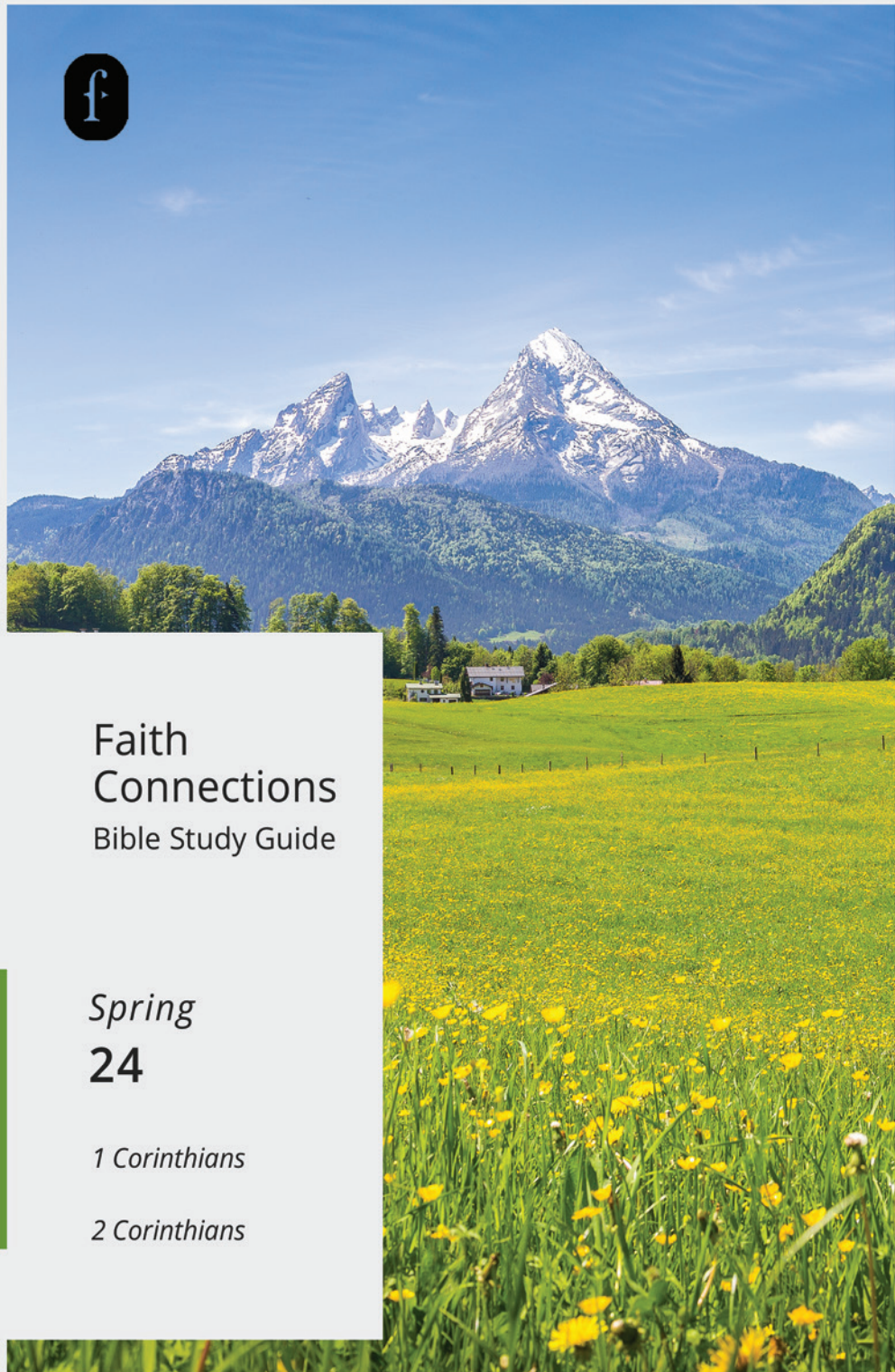
Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

Spring
24

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians



Bible Study Guide

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Spring 2024

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Key Verse Memory Back Cover

Mike L. Wonch

Editor

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Perspectives

Do You Smell?

Smells are powerful. Smells have the power to bring back certain memories. For example, often when I smell bacon cooking, my mind goes back to the times my mom would cook a special early morning breakfast. We may also identify certain smells with special days. For example, if I mentioned the smell of a turkey cooking, your mind most likely would think of some kind of Thanksgiving or other holiday memory. Not only do certain smells bring to mind certain memories, certain things bring to mind certain smells. For example, if I were to say gym locker room, or swamp, or bouquet of roses, or stockyard, most likely a certain smell would come to mind.

Smells have an effect on us. Think about the pleasant feeling you get when you enter a house and smell a delicious meal cooking, or smell someone's perfume/cologne that you like, or the scent of an air freshener. Now, think about how you feel when you get a whiff of bad breath, or someone who hasn't showered in a while, or burnt toast. Smells are powerful. We are attracted to pleasant smells and repelled by unpleasant ones.

Second Corinthians 2:15-16 says, "For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?" As believers, we are the aroma of Christ to others in the things we say and do. In regard to our spiritual aroma, one writer puts it this way, "Those who are being drawn by the Spirit immediately recognize the life-giving power of the message. Those who stubbornly refuse to believe, however, smell something foul—the judgment of death awaits them."*

During this quarter, think about the aroma of your life. What do you—spiritually speaking—smell like? Pray that God would make you a fragrance of the life offered through Christ to those around you. Ask the Holy Spirit to give your life an odor that, when encountered, points people to Christ.

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

*Life Application Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1999), 304-305.

March

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THE ONLY ANSWER TO CHURCH DIVISION

Loyalty to Jesus Christ is the key to unity in the church.

THE WORD

**1 CORINTHIANS
1:4-17**

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—⁶God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

KEY VERSE

¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹²What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

ENGAGE THE WORD

THANKSGIVING

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

A quick reading of 1 Corinthians reveals that the church in Corinth struggled with many problems and issues. As a result, Paul used this letter to correct bad behavior, rectify misunderstandings and false assumptions, and redirect the priorities and attitudes of the believers in Corinth. In light of these many problems, it is remarkable to observe that Paul did not hesitate to give thanks for the spiritual gifts of speech and knowledge with which God had enriched the Corinthians “in every way” (v. 5). Ironically, the abuse of these gifts was also the cause of many of the problems and grief Paul needed to confront and correct.

Despite the problems, Paul recognized that God himself had given these gifts. Thus, the core of the problem was not the gifts, but the Corinthians’ attitude toward the gifts. Later in this letter, Paul would strive to change the Corinthians’ boastful pride and improper attitude toward their spiritual gifts. But in this thanksgiving, he honored God as the giver of these gifts (vv. 6-7). At the same time, he began to redirect their focus away from their own prideful self-interest toward a thanksgiving that focused on God and Jesus Christ. What the believers needed to understand was that everything comes from God and is given in Jesus Christ. God is the One who supplies spiritual gifts that enable believers to stand firm and blameless to the very end (vv. 8-9). Fellowship with Jesus Christ is not achieved by human accomplishment, but by divine provision and enablement. Therefore, there is no room for prideful boasting.

DIVISIONS OVER LEADERS

1 Corinthians 1:10-12

After his thanksgiving, Paul began the main body of the letter with an impassioned appeal for unity among the believers. Calling upon the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, Paul urgently implored the Corinthians to put away their divisions by agreeing

Did You Know?

All Paul's epistles (except Galatians) follow the six-part format of the conventional letter in the Greco-Roman world: 1) opening salutation (identifying first the author and then the recipient); 2) greeting; 3) thanksgiving prayer; 4) body of the letter; 5) final greetings and personal news; 6) benediction.

with one another and being perfectly united in mind and thought. The phrase “agree with one another” (v. 10) is literally “say the same things.” Paul called on the Corinthians to focus on the truths that united them instead of highlighting the minor differences that divided them.

The cause of Paul's exhortation was a report from Corinth that there was division and quarreling among the believers. The news of this division was delivered to Paul from “Chloe's household” (v. 11). Most likely, one of the house churches in Corinth met in Chloe's home, and representatives of this house church delivered this troubling news to Paul. Chloe was probably the leader of this congregation in her home, but Paul offered no additional information to either confirm or deny this possibility.

Chloe's household reported that rival factions in the church were bickering over the popularity and superiority of one leader against another. Apparently, these rival groups claimed allegiance to the leadership and teaching of Paul, Apollos, Cephas (which is Peter's Aramaic name), and even Christ. The naming of Christ as a “spiritual competitor” with the other three is surprising, but these names were merely rallying points to bolster each group's arrogant boast for superiority over the other Christian groups. In reality, the division had little to do with these four leaders and much to do with the boastful pride and arrogance of each rival faction.

Unfortunately, the division and quarreling that took place in Corinth is all too familiar to believers and churches today. Such divisions tear the church apart and compromise the witness of the church to the world. Paul's passionate call for unity is needed today as much as ever.

AVOIDING ARGUMENTS BASED ON PRIDE

1 Corinthians 1:13-17

Paul quickly moved to dismantle the foolishness of such prideful distinctions. “Is Christ divided?” The

Think About It

There are approximately 40,000 Christian denominations. Nonetheless, the creeds of Christian denominations generally agree that Jesus is the Son of God who ministered, suffered, and died on a cross, but rose from the dead for the salvation of humankind. This is referred to as the gospel, meaning the “good news.”

question itself is absurd. Christ, our example, is not divided. He is one. Likewise, Christ’s followers should follow His example without exceptions. Paul’s other two questions emphasized the same foolish basis for divisions. Paul was not crucified for anyone, nor has anyone been baptized in the name of Paul. But ultimately, none of this matters because Christ did not send him to baptize, but to preach the gospel of Christ crucified for our salvation.

So often, divisions are the result of boastful claims of human wisdom and eloquence. But the power of the gospel is not found in these things, but in the unifying reality of the cross of Christ. Christ died for the salvation of all who believe in Him and place their faith in Him alone. Christian believers can be united in heart and mind on this foundational truth with which we all agree. Instead of getting distracted by focusing on secondary issues that cause quarrels and division, believers everywhere are called to unity in the message of the cross of Christ which binds us together in faith and obedience.

The church has the opportunity to live out the fulfillment of Christ’s prayer for unity (John 17:20-21) by choosing unity over personal preferences. Christian believers do not agree on everything, but we can agree on where our true allegiance should be: the Lord Jesus Christ who died for our salvation.

REFLECT

Think about ways you can build unity within your faith community.

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March

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PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S MISSION

God grows the church, but calls each of us to participate in different ways.

THE WORD

1 CORINTHIANS
3:1-17

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? ⁴For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings?

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. **⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.**

KEY VERSES

¹⁰By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. ¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

¹⁶Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

ENGAGE THE WORD

At Corinth, through their faith in Christ, the Corinthian believers had been lifted out of the sin and depravity of the worldliness of Corinth and into the life of the Spirit of God. But despite all the benefits of life in Christ, they struggled to leave behind the customs and habits they had learned while living in the world. Paul addressed these selfish struggles as he tried to help the Corinthians grow up in their new identity and faith.

EVIDENCE OF WORLDLINESS

1 Corinthians 3:1-4

In chapter 2, Paul contrasted the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of the Spirit. Through their faith in Christ, believers were filled by the Spirit (2:12). However, there is a significant difference between being filled with the Spirit and being controlled by the Spirit. Paul maintained that it was not enough to be merely born of the Spirit; believers also needed to grow and mature in the Spirit.

Notably, Paul did not deny that the prideful Corinthians were actually Christians. Too often Christians rush into condemnation of other believers when quarrels and disagreements arise. Paul did not deny their faith, but their divisive quarrels and competitive allegiance to different leaders revealed their spiritual immaturity. They should have been ready for solid spiritual food, but they lagged behind in their behavior and understanding as “mere infants in Christ” (v. 1). Their jealousy and quarreling demonstrated that, despite their boastful claims, they were not living by the Spirit of God, but by the spirit of the world. Their bickering did not resemble a growing child of God, but an immature child of the world, a “mere human being” (vv. 3-4). They were not growing up in their faith.

Did You Know?

When Paul wrote that “you yourselves are God’s temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16), he did not use the more general Greek term for “temple area” (*hieron*). Instead, Paul employed the Greek word typically used in the New Testament to identify the “holy of holies” where God’s presence was believed to dwell (*naos*).

CO-WORKERS IN GOD’S SERVICE

BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATION OF JESUS CHRIST

1 Corinthians 3:5-9

Immaturity and worldliness lead to divisiveness, but maturity in the Spirit leads to unity and cooperation. The worldly-minded Corinthians tried to bolster their status by claiming allegiance to Paul, Apollos, or Peter (v. 5; see also 1:12). But their focus was wrong. Christian leaders like Paul and Apollos were not competitive champions vying for allegiance and followers; they were “only servants” to whom God assigned a spiritual task (v. 5).

Paul described his task as planting and Apollos’ task as watering; however, it is God alone who is able to make a garden grow. The Corinthians’ immaturity caused them to focus on the relatively less important roles of Paul and Apollos.

Meanwhile, they overlooked God’s purpose of assigning each member a task to perform to accomplish God’s mission. Each task is different and performed in different ways, but they all are used by God for a common purpose, which is the growth of the church.

Paul summarized his gardening analogy with the unifying declaration that both he and Apollos were “co-workers in God’s service” (v. 9). God was in charge, and they were united together in their service to God as workers. While Apollos and Paul both belonged to God as His servant-workers, the Corinthians also belonged to God as His field and building, in which Paul and Apollos worked together. Thus, there was no place for bickering and status-seeking in the church because both Paul and Apollos shared together in the same work of God in growing the church, even though their specific tasks and methods might have been vastly different.

1 Corinthians 3:10-17

The reference to “God’s building” (v. 9) prompted Paul to utilize a construction metaphor to emphasize God’s sovereign plan for building the church. Paul’s particular gift was planting churches, but he quick-

Think About It

When Paul wrote about building with gold and silver or with hay and straw (1 Corinthians 3:12-13), he did not teach about salvation by works. His focus was less on what they built than on how they built on the foundation of Christ. Thus, Paul taught about Christ's assessment of the way Christians lived their lives after they were saved.

ly dismissed any grounds for boasting because his work was merely a result of God's grace. Indeed, Paul had begun the work, but other faithful co-workers in God's service had continued to build on that foundation. Moreover, the only true foundation had already been laid by God himself through the crucifixion (and resurrection) of Jesus Christ. Throughout these verses, Paul's focus remained persistently theocentric; namely, God is at the center of it all.

But Paul also cautioned the Corinthians to be careful to "build with care" on the foundation of Christ. On the Day of Judgment when Christ will return, the quality of their work would be revealed by fire to be either priceless and eternal or worthless and destructible. Paul's concern was that the development and growth of the believers in Corinth would be consistent with the foundation of the church, which is Jesus Christ. Paul insinuated that works of bickering and divisiveness would prove to be worthless and destructive, but works of unity among believers and selfless service to Christ would be valued and eternal.

Finally, Paul declared that the believers themselves constituted the temple of God and the place where God's Spirit dwells. Paul warned that anyone who destroyed the temple (that is, any of God's people) would face the same fate of destruction. Thus, believers should not quarrel and bicker with other people who exercise different God-given gifts. Instead, Christians need to recognize the value and diversity of every individual believer's contribution to God's plan for building the church. Although our gifts and tasks are very different, our purpose of participating in God's mission is the same: to build up and strengthen the church of God.

REFLECT

Take time to thank God for those who you consider "co-workers" in the kingdom of God.

March

17

LOOKING OUT FOR OTHERS

*Christian liberty must always be tempered
by concern for weaker believers.*

THE WORD

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13 **N**ow about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. ²Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. ³But whoever loves God is known by God.

⁴So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” ⁵For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), ⁶yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

⁷But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

KEY VERSE

⁹Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? ¹¹So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹²When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

ENGAGE THE WORD

The issue discussed in today's passage seems, for us, to ask the most outlandish and irrelevant question in the Bible: Can Christians eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols? When we look more closely at Paul's response to this question, he has provided valuable information about what it means to be part of a community of faith and the responsibility believers have to look out for one another.

KNOWLEDGE VERSUS LOVE

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

The Corinthians asked Paul whether believers could eat food (or meat) sacrificed to idols. But Paul began his response by discussing knowledge.

Knowledge was very important to the Corinthians. The sentence "we all possess knowledge" (8:1) was undoubtedly an echo of a proud saying Paul had heard from some of the Corinthian believers. In fact, many of the problems Paul confronted in Corinth had to do with the Corinthians' boastful notion that they possessed superior knowledge. Paul's response to this boast was rather pointed: "knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (v. 1). Unfortunately, love and consideration of others were merely an afterthought in the minds of these know-it-all believers.

Paul's observation about "those who think they know something" (v. 2) indicates that these people thought they had attained some kind of ultimate knowledge in these spiritual matters. And yet, their puffed up knowledge lacked love or concern for others. Paul realized that what we know only matters when it is displayed with a motivation of love for others. When a person truly knows God, they will reflect this knowledge in their love for others. True Christian knowledge is inseparable from love. When love is motivated by the realization that God loved us first, our loving response reveals that we truly know God. More importantly, our love reveals that we are known by Him.

Did You Know?

Since eating idol meat was morally neutral, some of the Corinthians claimed the right to be able to eat it. For Paul, eating idol meat was morally neutral with no spiritual advantage or disadvantage gained by eating it. Thus, the concern for other believers should take precedence.

PAUL POINTS TO MONOTHEISM

PROTECTING THE FAITH OF OTHERS

1 Corinthians 8:4-6

After emphasizing the central role of love, Paul moved back to the question about food sacrificed to idols. The Corinthians lived in a world in which many so-called gods, lords, and idols were worshiped. However, Christians were monotheistic, acknowledging the existence of only one God, the Father of Jesus Christ. Paul undoubtedly taught this lesson on monotheism to the Corinthians when he planted the church. Paul now reminded them there is only one God and that other idols or so-called gods were of no account. This would have been a point on which Paul and the “stronger” Corinthian believers agreed.

In this earliest formulation of Christian monotheism, Paul declared there is only one God, whom believers know as the Father. Likewise, there is only one Lord, whom believers know to be Jesus Christ. For Paul, there is no tension between the lordship of Jesus and the uniqueness of God the Father. In fact, the fatherhood of God implies the lordship of Jesus Christ. While their titles as Father (God) and Lord (Jesus) are slightly different, their functions—“from whom and through whom all things came” and “for whom and through whom we live” (v. 6)—complement each other perfectly. Paul asserted not only God’s unique oneness, but also Christ’s mediating role in creation and His preexistence before all things as intrinsic expressions of His oneness and shared divine activities with God the Father.

1 Corinthians 8:7-13

Paul shared this understanding of God in his teaching to the Corinthians, but not everyone immediately grasped this knowledge. Some young or less mature believers retained the conviction that eating meat sacrificed to idols caused them to participate in idol worship. For these believers with a “weak conscience” (v. 7), the consumption of food sacrificed to idols was equated with idol worship and the denunciation of

Think About It

Greek and Roman society was inundated by idolatry and pagan sacrifices. Pagan worshipers were united with their idols by consuming meat from sacrifices. Christian converts who had turned away from their former pagan gods were lured back into idol worship by the vivid memories elicited by eating idol meat.

the Christian faith. Believers who were more mature understood that food by itself does not bring a person closer to, nor further away from, God. Knowing that salvation was not a matter of what a person eats caused the knowledge-filled Corinthians to insist they had the right to eat whatever they wanted to eat.

To eat or not to eat? That was the question. The principle Paul established in responding to this question is as relevant today as it was in the first century. Paul warned believers not to allow the exercise of their perceived rights to become a stumbling block to the weak. When a stronger believer's example and behavior causes a weaker believer to stumble and fall from their faith, they sin not only against the weaker believer but against Christ himself. Paul declared that, even though his knowledge might give him the right to eat whatever meat he wanted to eat, he would rather never eat meat again than to cause a weaker brother or sister to fall into sin. The true believer's concern and love for others far outweighs their concern for their own rights or privileges.

In the first century the issue was meat sacrificed to idols. In our own times there are many other issues that can divide our churches and damage the faith of those around us: social media, education, politics, diet, music styles, carpet colors, service schedules, and an endless list of other such concerns. The fact is that the exercise of our freedoms and rights is not nearly as important as the impact our behavior can have on those around us. As members of the body of Christ, our behavior is not driven by our rights, but by our love for Christ and others that sustains, protects, and builds up the faith of those around us.

REFLECT

In what way can you be a Christlike example to a "weaker" brother or sister in the faith this week?

March

24

WHEN THE CHURCH EATS TOGETHER

The sacrament of communion provides a unique opportunity for the body of Christ to show oneness in Christ.

THE WORD

**1 CORINTHIANS
11:17-34**

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²²Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

KEY VERSES

²³For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰That is why many among you are weak and sick, and

a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³²Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

³³So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. ³⁴Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

And when I come I will give further directions.

ENGAGE THE WORD

ABUSES OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

1 Corinthians 11:17-22

Paul expressed his concern about the Corinthians' behavior with a double assertion that he had no praise for them (vv. 17 and 22). When they met together, their selfish behavior caused division among the members instead of unity. In other words, when they "came together," they were not really together at all. This was especially reprehensible because this happened during the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The early church commemorated the Lord's Supper as part of a shared meal called an "agape meal" or "love feast." Instead of sharing the meal together, though, the wealthier members began to eat and drink before the poorer people arrived. Their selfish behavior made a mockery of a meal that was intended to symbolize the unity of believers with Christ as well as with each other. Indeed, these gatherings did more harm than good as they widened the gap between the rich and the poor instead of closing the gap in Christian unity and love.

Church communal meals were meant to be shared, not separated by families or economic classes. At a shared meal, the church celebrated its unity without embarrassing those with little to share. The goal was unity, whether in eating or in taking communion together. Paul was appalled that the Corinthians turned a meal instituted by Jesus to promote selflessness and unity into a divisive exhibit of gluttony and selfishness.

Did You Know?

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is often called "Communion" or the "Eucharist." Since Jesus instituted the sacrament during a Passover meal, the early church also combined the Eucharist with a shared meal (called a "love feast"). By the mid-third century, though, the Eucharist was celebrated separately from a communal meal.

ORIGIN OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

CELEBRATING THE LORD'S SUPPER TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The Corinthians' behavior was in direct conflict with the spirit of the Lord's Supper as Paul had received it and passed it on to them. Paul reminded them of the meaningful origin of this meal that Christ himself inaugurated on the night when He was betrayed. While celebrating Passover with His disciples, Jesus took the bread and the cup and redefined them in terms of the sacrificial gift of His body and blood for the benefit of others. The bread was broken as a symbol of Christ's body that was broken for them. As they ate, they were invited to remember Christ's life-giving sacrifice for others. Taking the cup, Jesus redefined it as representative of the new covenant in His blood. Just as the blood of the sacrificed animal sealed the old covenant, the blood of Jesus' body sealed the new covenant. Whenever they drank, they should remember Jesus' selfless act of pouring out His blood for the salvation of others. This commemorated supper was not only a reminder of Jesus' death, but it was also a celebration of His resurrection until His second coming.

Paul's recitation of Christ's inauguration of the Lord's Supper was a vivid reminder that communion is not to be celebrated flippantly, but reverently and thoughtfully. By partaking of the bread and the cup of Christ, believers symbolically identify themselves with the Lord who freely and sacrificially gave himself for us. Likewise, the meal implicitly calls believers to emulate Christ's sacrificial acts in a life of love and concern for others.

1 Corinthians 11:27-34

Participating in the Lord's Supper "in an unworthy manner" involved coming to the table in an irreverent or sinful way. Jesus' self-giving love made their selfish abuse of the Lord's Supper all the more shameful. Their behavior undermined and denied the very meaning of Christ's death for the sake of others. Therefore, Paul urged them to examine themselves

Think About It

“The Lord’s Supper” has a historical emphasis on the past and the future. It points the worshipers’ attention back to the last supper which our Lord shared with His disciples before His arrest. At that supper He instituted this sacrament. It also looks forward to the time when all believers will gather around the heavenly banquet table after the Lord has gathered us all home.

carefully before they ate or drank at the table of communion. Otherwise, the table intended to bring unity and grace would become an instrument of judgment.

The careful discernment to which Paul called the believers was not a summons to examine the worthiness of their own character; rather, it was a call to examine the nature of their actions. The Lord’s Supper was meant to reflect the communion of believers with Christ and with each other. The early believers called it a “love feast” because the meal was intended to symbolize their love for Christ and for each other. In pointing out this glaring fault in their gatherings, Paul revealed the way to properly celebrate the Lord’s Supper as a church: it should be celebrated “together” (v. 33).

The taking of communion is a unique opportunity to honor our union with Christ and with His body, the church. It should not be denigrated into a perfunctory ritual or into a selfish moment of personal reflection that isolates the individual from the worshiping community. The act of communion provides the church with a shared experience in which we are eternally connected to all believers who have ever received the elements of this sacred supper, both past and present. This is the reason why communion should almost always be served communally (“you should all eat together,” v. 33), rather than individually. It was instituted to be a shared experience; very personal, yet partaken corporately as the one body of Christ.

REFLECT What special meaning does the Lord’s Supper hold for you?

DANIEL G. POWERS

March

31

ALIVE IN CHRIST

Jesus' resurrection makes eternal life possible.

THE WORD

**1 CORINTHIANS
15:12-22**

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²**For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.**

KEY VERSE

51-57

⁵¹Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵²in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵“Where, O death, is your victory?”

Where, O death, is your sting?"

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

ENGAGE THE WORD

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the foundation of the Christian faith. Through His resurrection, Jesus destroyed the power of death and sin over humanity, and He paved the way for His followers to participate in His victory by believing in Him and following after Him, both now and into eternal life.

IMPLICATIONS OF DENYING THE RESURRECTION

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

In Corinth, there were apparently some believers who denied the resurrection of the dead. This should not be so surprising because there have always been people, both in the ancient world as well as in the world today, who have denied the resurrection of the dead or a day of final judgment. For instance, the Jewish ruling council in the first century consisted of the Pharisees (Paul's former group) and the Sadducees. One major difference between these two Jewish sects was that the Pharisees believed in the physical resurrection of the dead for final judgment; the Sadducees did not. Likewise, Greek philosophy often taught that the spirit and the body were in perpetual conflict. This was due to their idea that the spirit was inherently good and eternal while the physical body was inherently evil and temporary. As a result, most Greeks viewed the idea of the resurrection of the body as inconceivable and foolish (see 1 Corinthians 1:22-25). Nonetheless, Paul reminded the Corinthians that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was the message Paul (and the other apostles) preached, and it was the message the Corinthians had accepted and believed (15:11).

In response to this denial of the resurrection, Paul turned the Corinthians' argument upside down by high-

Did You Know?

Paul used Adam/Christ terminology in several letters to describe the believers' new identity in Christ instead of their old identity in Adam (Romans 5:12-14, 18-19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45-49; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Just as Adam's sin brought death to all people, Christ's grace brought forgiveness and resurrected life to all who believe.

ALIVE IN CHRIST

lighting the absurd implications of their belief that the dead are not raised. In quick succession, Paul demonstrated that, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then 1) Not even Christ has been raised (vv. 13, 16); 2) The apostles' preaching and the Corinthians' faith were useless (v. 14); 3) Paul and the apostles were liars because they preached Christ's resurrection (v. 15); 4) Faith was futile, and all humanity stands condemned for their sins (v. 17); and 5) Those who had died in Christ were eternally lost (v. 18). In short, if there is no resurrection of the dead, the Christian message of salvation was a farce, and believers were deceived fools to be pitied more than any other group of people (v. 19).

1 Corinthians 15:20-22

The wonderful news was that none of these absurd implications was true. Indeed, Christ has been raised from the dead as the firstfruits of those who have died. The reference to "firstfruits" is very significant. Drawn from Leviticus 23:10-11, the firstfruits referred to the first sheaf of the harvest that was offered to God. The first fruit of the produce was not only prior to the rest of the harvest, but it was also an assurance that the rest of the harvest would follow. Since Christ was raised from the dead as the "first fruit," believers can have the assurance and confidence that they, too, will be raised from the dead.

Paul compared Christ and Adam to illustrate the reversal that Christ's resurrection caused in the fate of humanity. Just as death came through one man (Adam), so also the resurrection of the dead comes through one man (Christ). Life for every human can be traced back to Adam. With only a few Old Testament exceptions (i.e., Enoch and Elijah), Adam's choice to sin brought death to all humanity as well. Every person lives with a tendency to sin as Adam did, and as a result, every person dies as a consequence of sin. When Jesus died on the cross, He died for all humankind. When He rose from the dead, He conquered sin

Think About It

Paul declared that “the power of sin is the law” (1 Corinthians 15:56). The law is not inherently bad. On the contrary, the law reveals God’s righteousness and holiness to humanity. However, the law also exposes sin and, since it cannot forgive sin, it participates in the condemnation of sinners.

VICTORY IN JESUS

and death for all and He offers life and freedom from sin to all who put their faith in Him. Through birth, all humanity is “in Adam,” and as a result, all humanity dies. But through His death and resurrection on our behalf, Christ offers life to all who believe in Him so that we can participate in resurrected life “in Christ.” This is the good news that permeates the Easter story: even though in Adam we all die, through faith in Jesus Christ, all who believe will be made alive in Christ and live eternally with Him.

1 Corinthians 15:51-57

In the final verses of this “resurrection chapter,” Paul explained how and when the believers would be raised. The reference to the “last trumpet” was a common feature of apocalyptic language describing the end of time. Paul declared in verse 50 that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” At the time of the resurrection, then, the body must be transformed. The “perishable” (referring to the bodies of those believers who have died) will be raised imperishable, and the mortal (referring to the bodies of those believers who are still alive) will be raised immortal. At the day of resurrection, God will raise believers to new life in Christ so that eternal life will finally overcome and defeat death forever (vv. 54-55).

Sin is to blame for both physical and spiritual death. While the law points to God’s righteousness and goodness, it actually strengthens the sting of sin by revealing how sinful we are. Thus, the law condemns us. But the deadly cycle of law, sin, and death are broken by the victory of Christ’s resurrection over sin and death. Thanks be to God for victory in Jesus!

REFLECT

Think about the way your life can be a testimony of the power of the resurrection.

April

7

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Although the body of Christ is one, there are many parts.

THE WORD

**1 CORINTHIANS
12:12-31a**

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

KEY VERSE

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a

part of it. ²⁸And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

ENGAGE THE WORD

In Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12—14, the problems of boastful pride, superiority, and division became glaringly visible. Drawing upon the analogy of the human body, Paul urged the Corinthians to recognize and embrace unity in the midst of diversity.

ONE BODY WITH MANY PARTS

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

One of Paul's most vivid analogies of the church was as the body of Christ. Paul utilized this illustration to emphasize both the believer's personal identity with Christ and all believers' identity and unity with each other. One striking characteristic of the human body is its ability to work together as a unified whole, despite its diversity of parts. Paul maintained that the same unity in diversity was true with the body of Christ, the church. Despite different backgrounds, genders, nationalities, or economic positions, all believers were baptized by the one Spirit and they all partook (literally, "drank," v. 13) from the same Spirit. But the sameness of the Spirit does not mean the different members of the body of Christ will be the same. Indeed, just as the human body is made up of different parts with different functions, so also the body of Christ is made up of different people who have different roles and functions. This is the way God created the body, and it is also the way the Spirit, through His spiritual gifts, created the church.

NO PART IS TOO INSIGNIFICANT

1 Corinthians 12:15-20

No body part is too insignificant to be a functioning

Did You Know?

Paul concluded his appeal for unity in the midst of diversity in 1 Corinthians 12:29-30 with seven rhetorical questions: Are all apostles? Are all prophets?...and so on. The Greek construction of each question clearly indicated that the implied answer is “No.” Diversity within the body of Christ is not accidental, but was God’s design.

member of the human body. The foot or ear is not disqualified merely because they are less prominent than the hand or eye. Each part is valuable and needed, even though some parts are more noticeable and visible. But what does this have to do with spiritual gifts (the topic of chapters 12—14)?

Apparently, some believers thought they were inferior because they did not display flamboyant and visible gifts. The phrase, “I do not belong to the body” (vv. 15, 16), probably reflected this inferior sentiment. The prideful boasts of those who displayed more dramatic gifts undoubtedly reinforced this sense of inferiority.

Paul reminded the believers that all the parts were needed for the body to function. Moreover, God himself designed the body to function in this way. If all the body parts were the same, the body would cease to exist. Likewise, the members of the church do not share the same gifts, talents, abilities, or responsibilities. Otherwise, the church would be one-dimensional, dysfunctional, and ineffective in representing Christ to the world. When each diverse member participates and functions as God intended, the church becomes a healthy, thriving, united organism.

NO PART IS TOO IMPORTANT

1 Corinthians 12:21-26

In the same way, no part is too important for the body. The mindset of inferiority says, “I do not belong to the body” (vv. 15, 16), while the mindset of superiority says, “I don’t need you” (v. 21). Apparently, some Corinthian believers thought their dramatic and visible spiritual gifts made them superior to everyone else.

Paul’s example of the body contradicted this misconception. The metaphorical dialogue between the parts of the body represented the arguments and divisions that plagued the Corinthian church. Paul understood the church needed to develop a unity that reflected mutual care and concern for the whole body of believers (v. 25), not just for those who stood in the

Think About It

Paul uses the analogy of a body to help the church at Corinth understand the body of Christ. Unity among the diversity is the key for a body to work as it should. In relation to the body of Christ, no gift is more important than any other. Everyone is to work together and use their gifts in order to be effective as the church of Jesus Christ.

THE UNITY OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

spotlight of attention. The members whose spiritual gifts were undervalued and overlooked needed to be affirmed and recognized for their valuable contribution. Meanwhile, those gifts which the Corinthians celebrated and exalted because of their visible and public nature needed to be placed in a more balanced perspective. In a healthy church body, the entire congregation suffers or is honored when a member suffers or is honored. This is the way God designed both the body and the church to be.

1 Corinthians 12:27-31a

Paul concluded his discussion of the unity of the body with the bold declaration, “You are the body of Christ.” Despite the diversity of the Corinthian believers in their spiritual gifts, they were united by God’s design and work among them. Paul did not deny their different roles. The gifts were indeed diverse. But each member was called and gifted by God to fulfill a special function within the body. The roles of apostles, prophets, and teachers headed the list in terms of priority because without them there would be no church. The remaining gifts Paul mentioned were primarily functional and service-oriented; unfortunately, these were characteristics the Corinthians largely lacked.

God is the One who appoints and gifts His children with the tasks and roles they need to fulfill. When everyone in the church does what they have been called, equipped, and gifted to do, there is spiritual health, functionality, and unity, just as God intended. As a result, the whole body of Christ rejoices together (v. 26).

REFLECT Take time to think about what being a part of the body of Christ means to you.

DANIEL G. POWERS

April

14

LOVE, THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY

Christian love should provide the foundation for all of life.

THE WORD

1 CORINTHIANS 12:31b **A**nd yet I will show you the most excellent way.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13 ¹If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹²For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

KEY VERSE

¹³And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

ENGAGE THE WORD

The Corinthians seemed to be intent on proving their spiritual superiority over other followers of Christ. Paul recognized their core deficiency was a lack of love. With poetic and compelling inspiration, Paul set forth sacrificial, godly love as the very essence of the Christian life.

NOTHING WITHOUT LOVE

1 Corinthians 12:31b—13:3

First Corinthians 13 is often called the “Love Chapter” because of its exquisite focus on love. Many are tempted to read this chapter as a stand-alone text about the general merits of love. The key to understanding this important chapter, however, is to read it in its context. Paul wrote chapter 13 in the middle of his discussion of the use and abuse of spiritual gifts by the Corinthians (chaps. 12—14). Paul viewed godly love (agape love) as the solution to the destructive and divisive ways the Corinthians were using their spiritual gifts.

Using three examples that were undoubtedly derived from the Corinthians—speaking in the tongues of men or of angels, exhibiting prophetic wisdom and knowledge, and performing acts of self-sacrificial service—Paul proclaimed all activities and gifts to be essentially worthless without love. In essence, Paul endorsed the thought-provoking perspective that the motivation of a believer’s actions is just as important as the actions themselves. Spiritual gifts and extraordinary actions were nothing without love.

A person can preach like Billy Graham, live sacrificially like Mother Teresa, surrender their life to death like a martyr, and witness to the world like Corrie ten Boom, but unless motivated by love, they gain nothing. All of the God-given gifts do not matter unless they are offered to God with an attitude of unconditional love.

THE CHARACTER OF TRUE LOVE

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Paul characterized the nature of true love with depictions of what love is and what love is not. Taken

Did You Know?

Greek has four main words translated as “love:” *eros*, which refers to romantic or sexual love; *storge*, which depicts familial love like that of a mother for her baby; *philia*, which denotes the love of friends and comrades; and *agape*, which is often described as unconditional godly love. Paul used *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13.

as a whole, verses 4-7 portray love as selfless, seeking the good of others first and before one’s self. This list of love’s characteristics is certainly not exhaustive. Rather, these examples of loving and unloving behavior were undoubtedly characteristics the Corinthian believers lacked.

One way to understand what true love looks like is to substitute the name “Jesus” for “love” throughout verses 4-7. Indeed, true love looks exactly like Jesus. Jesus’ entire life was an offering of love for God and for others, even for those who didn’t deserve it. The love described in these verses is the love God has for people as demonstrated and exemplified in Jesus. Jesus specifically called His disciples to love one another in the same way as He loved them (John 13:34-35). As Christ’s followers, believers are called to pattern their lives on the model Jesus provided; this is a model of love. In these verses, then, Paul presented love as the essential Christian attribute: love is characterized as selflessness and not self-centeredness.

Modern society tends to identify love as a fickle emotion, which a person either feels or doesn’t feel at any given moment. But Paul did not depict godly love (*agape*) as an emotion. Rather, in the descriptions of love provided in these verses, Paul highlighted love as an attribute to be acted on instead of an emotion to be felt. In other words, Paul characterized *agape* love as a willful decision to elevate the interests of others above one’s own interests. Love always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres on behalf of others not because a believer always “feels” an emotion that prompts such behavior. Instead, a believer exhibits these willful acts on behalf of others out of their love and obedience to Christ and their desire to be like Him. Indeed, Christian love is the evidence of spiritual maturity—a life spent living, loving, and serving like Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

In the last verses, Paul shifted his emphasis from

**THE ETERNAL
GREATNESS OF
LOVE**

Think About It

Love is the first fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. In the light of 1 Corinthians 13, love must be present with all the other gifts and fruits of the Spirit if these other attributes are to be used in ways that please God and have eternal value.

the acts of love to the duration of love: love never fails and it lasts forever. The Corinthians elevated gifts that were more prominent and visible above other spiritual gifts. Without demeaning or negating these gifts, Paul identified their finite and limited value. Each of these gifts is essentially focused on trying to penetrate and understand the plan and will of God. But when God reveals himself at the Last Day when Christ will return, these gifts will cease because God's will and plan will be evident to all people. By contrast, faith, hope, and love will remain forever. Among these three, however, love is the greatest because love unites believers to God and believers with one another.

Even the most mature believers can sometimes struggle to find hope in bleak circumstances or find faith against extreme odds in an increasingly faithless world. But the reality and assurance of God's love will never fail and it will last forever.

Perhaps now more than ever, believers are needed to model God's love for others in the midst of difficult and strained circumstances. In a time when differences are magnified and unity is challenged at every corner, Christians need to allow their love for Christ to spill over into a love, respect, and consideration of others even in the midst of disagreements. This is not a syrupy, fickle love that comes and goes with the instability of emotion; but it is a willful decision to act in the best interests of others as an expression of our love for Christ, who first loved us. In a world darkened by self-interest and vicious reprisals against those with different opinions and values, they will know we are Christians by our love.

REFLECT | In what ways can you express God's love to others this week?

April

21

GOD'S COMFORT IN TIMES OF TROUBLE

God's comfort is present and sufficient in times of suffering and distress.

THE WORD

2 CORINTHIANS
1:3-11

KEY VERSE

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵**For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.** ⁶If 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. ⁷And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

⁸We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ¹¹as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

2 CORINTHIANS
4:7-12

⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life

of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹²So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

ENGAGE THE WORD

OUR GOD OF COMPASSION AND ALL COMFORT

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Although his life was full of trouble and suffering, Paul never put the focus solely on himself and his woes to solicit pity from others. Nor did his challenges cause him to question God or His purpose for his life. Instead, his difficulties caused him to turn to God in worship. In fact, in this letter where Paul often refers to the ways that he suffered for Christ, he begins it with praise to the God who provided “comfort” during his suffering (1:3-4). This is striking when we look at other letters that Paul wrote. Usually, Paul begins his letters with a prayer of thanksgiving for the church to which he sends his letter (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; Philippians 1:3-11; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10; Romans 1:8-15). Instead, here, Paul prays a prayer of blessing and praise for the God who has met his every need because He is the “Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort.” Although we might expect that a truly caring God would change Paul’s distressing circumstances, Paul found something greater and deeper because God did not simply remove them. In these difficult circumstances, God showed deep abiding concern for Paul’s difficulties (i.e., God’s compassion) and He provided the kind of encouragement that Paul needed to persevere through them (i.e., God’s comfort). Sometimes, though, God did change Paul’s circumstances.

God’s comfort and compassion resulted in Paul’s deliverance from peril (1:10). In God’s hands, difficult and trying circumstances never have the last word. God provides both compassion and comfort (and even, at times, deliverance) as He uses these adverse circumstances to transform His people into the image of Christ.

Did You Know?

The Greek words (*paraklēsis*, noun, and *parakaleō*, verb) that are both translated as “comfort” here are frequently used in 2 Corinthians (29 times) and occur seven times in 1:3-11 alone. Sometimes the words are translated as “encouragement” (noun) or be “encouraged” (verb).

COMFORT IS ABUNDANCE THROUGH CHRIST

PAUL'S SUFFERING AND TROUBLES

2 Corinthians 1:5-7

Although Paul's prayer of praise arises out of the joy he feels after experiencing God's compassion and comfort, he does not end there. Instead, Paul invites the Corinthians to join in this prayer because they also benefit from what God has done in Paul's life. Whenever God's people face suffering, Paul declares that their “comfort abounds through Christ” (1:5). And since Paul and his companions have experienced this abundance of comfort, they can now be comforting to others who are in trouble, including the Corinthians. In fact, because of Paul's suffering, the Corinthians are now recipients of both comfort and salvation as they learn “patient endurance” during their own sufferings (1:6). We, too, can lay claim to the promise that Paul describes here. Whenever we share in the kinds of suffering that Paul experienced, so also, we share in the same comfort from God that Paul experienced (1:7). In addition, because of that comfort, we too can be agents of comfort for those suffering all around us.

2 Corinthians 1:8-11

Anyone that has read about Paul knows that his life as an apostle for Christ was not an easy one. Throughout the book of Acts, we read about his trouble with his fellow Jews (e.g., Acts 13:44-45; 18:5-6; 19:8-10), his imprisonments (e.g., Acts 16:16-40; 21:33-36), the attempts to stone him (e.g., Acts 14:5), and the numerous attempts to have him killed (e.g., Acts 21:30-32; 22:12-22). If these troubles were not enough, Paul appears to have come face to face with his own death. In 1:8-9, Paul says that he “despaired of life itself” and he even believed that he was under the “sentence of death.” Paul never states what this situation was for him. He could be speaking literally about a particular imprisonment where he was sentenced to death. More likely Paul is speaking figuratively about a serious illness that almost took his life. This great

Think About It

We do not give status to the gospel by an exhibition of our strength, but by our willingness to be His “clay pot.” That is why even in our suffering, and often because of our suffering, we can bring glory to the name of Jesus.

JARS OF CLAY

pressure was far beyond his “ability to endure” (1:8); however, through it he learned lessons on how not to rely upon oneself but on God (1:9). In the end, God delivered him from this “deadly peril” (1:10) and he had hope for God’s future deliverance.

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Throughout 2 Corinthians Paul often refers to challenging situations. In 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 he highlights several of them, including being “hard pressed on every side” (v. 8). In essence, he often found himself not knowing who his friends were and, perhaps, even found himself all alone. Other difficult situations included being perplexed, persecuted, and even struck down. In those moments, he was so burdened by his sufferings that he felt like he carried in his own body “the death of Jesus” (v. 10).

Paul equates followers of Christ to jars of clay with a treasure inside (v. 7). That treasure is God’s glory revealed in Christ (v. 6). Even though we ourselves are fragile clay jars that are often hard pressed, crushed, persecuted, and even struck down like Paul (v. 8), God’s all-surpassing power, compassion, and comfort keep us from being broken so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body (v. 11). The irony here is that the very moments when we think our lives are at their lowest are the moments when God in Christ is most clearly revealed, because we must depend completely on God. Paul’s life is a testimony to this truth. Paul’s prayer is that our lives will be a testimony to this truth as well.

REFLECT How has God been a source of comfort during your difficult moments? How can you be a source of comfort to those facing difficulties?

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April
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FORGIVENESS WITHIN THE BODY

Interpersonal conflicts within the body of Christ sometimes require discipline and often require forgiveness.

THE WORD

**2 CORINTHIANS
1:23-24**

call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. ²⁴Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

**2 CORINTHIANS
2:1-11**

¹So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. ²For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? ³I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. ⁴For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

⁵If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. ⁶The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. ⁷Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. ¹⁰Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

**2 CORINTHIANS
7:8-10**

⁸Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a

little while—⁹yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰**Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.**

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

PAUL AND THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

2 Corinthians 1:23—2:1-4; 7:8-10

Of all of Paul's churches, we know the most about his struggles with the church at Corinth. From his letters, we know that after he founded the church, he visited it two more times. Between those visits, he wrote letters. When Paul visited the church a second time, that visit did not go well (vv. 1-2). So, when it came time to make a third visit to Corinth, he decided against it. Instead, he wrote a stinging letter of rebuke that highlighted some sin that the community allowed to exist and which strained their relationship with Paul. This letter is often referred to as the "tearful letter" (2:3-4; 7:8). The good news is that the church responded positively to Paul's tearful letter; the Corinthians dealt with the sin and the source of the grief (2:5-6).

How Paul's relationship with the Corinthians became strained is not clear. All that we know is that someone in the congregation "did the wrong" (7:12) and "caused grief" (2:5) to both Paul and the Corinthians. If Paul had been more specific, he would have undermined his hope for restoration of the offender (2:7-8).

What is most important is that Paul's letter made the church "sorrowful as God intended," which then led to their repentance (7:9). And as part of their repentance, they sought justice (7:11) by punishing the one who had done wrong (2:6). Yet, as Paul makes clear, this kind of godly sorrow is not an end in itself, but ultimately pushes Christians to take actions that lead to salvation and healing (7:10).

Did You Know?

Paul calls the one trying to destroy the Corinthian community Satan (2:11; 11:14; 12:7). He is also called the god of this age (4:4), Belial (6:15), and the serpent (11:3). He is the ultimate deceiver and opponent to the gospel message.

GOING BEYOND PUNISHMENT

THE CALL TO FORGIVE

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

For Paul, repentance and punishment were not enough. For the church to be the church, the goal for a broken relationship must be restoration. Both the Corinthians and Paul were already enjoying the fruit of *their* restored relationship (7:7). Paul identifies that fruit primarily as joy and a renewed confidence in each other (2:3). Though this was true, the one that had created the friction between Paul and the church did not enjoy any of this. Likely, the offender had been removed from the church and so could no longer participate in the life of the church. While Paul sees this punishment as sufficient (2:6) and appropriate to the circumstances, he also sees that it is now time for the church to take a different stance towards the offender. So, Paul urges the church to forgive and comfort him (2:7). In essence, he wants them to reaffirm their love for the offender (2:8). And should they, as the church, forgive him, then Paul will do so as well (2:10).

Though forgiveness is the natural next step toward restoration, Paul understands it to be a hard rung to climb, but points out its necessity. First, Paul does not command them to forgive the offender. He says that they “ought” to (2:7) and then he urges (2:8) them to do so. A command to forgive will only bring more grief and sorrow. For forgiveness to result in restoration, it must be a decision that is initiated by those hurt in the relationship.

Second, Paul understands forgiveness to be a challenge. In fact, Paul calls this challenge a test (2:9). In his tearful letter that he had sent them earlier, Paul was testing them when he called the church to deal with the sin that existed among them. They passed that test by responding with godly sorrow and repentance. Now, they were faced with an even greater test. They needed to forgive the offender that had created the problems in the first place. Paul trusts that they will respond to this request with the same obedience

Think About It

Forgiveness is never a formality. It is essential to who the church is. The church is a body that is rooted in the fertile soil of God's love. With such a foundation, the church and its individual members must produce fruit that is in keeping with the soil from which they draw their nutrients.

that caused them to respond with repentance before. And it is that repentance that now made forgiveness and restoration possible.

Paul also gives three reasons why forgiveness was so important in this situation. He first mentions the offender. Now that the church has made it clear to the offender that his actions were wrong, the offender had a choice, either remain committed to his sin or join the church in repentance. The offender chose to repent. Such repentance should result in restoration, but that restoration was now in the hands of the church. Without forgiveness, the offender would suffer from "excessive sorrow" beyond what he can bear (2:7). Second, for Paul, forgiveness is necessary for the community as a whole. Unless they move toward forgiveness and restoration, Satan will use their disobedience to sow seeds of division within the community. Finally, as the church learned when Paul challenged them in his tearful letter, godly sorrow leads to repentance which then leads to salvation (7:9-10). Now that the offender has repented, his godly sorrow should result in a restored relationship with the community. But that is only possible if they forgive him.

As we reflect on Paul's teachings on forgiveness and restoration, may we find ways to choose to forgive and to seek restoration in our churches.

REFLECT

Are there people that God is asking you to forgive in your family or church?

WILLIAM MALAS

May

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REFLECTING THE NEW COVENANT

*In the new covenant, each Christian is called
to reflect the glory of God.*

THE WORD

**2 CORINTHIANS
3:1-18**

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, ²like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴Such confidence we have through Christ before God. ⁵Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

⁷Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, ⁸will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. ¹¹And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

¹²Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. ¹⁴But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers

KEY VERSE

their hearts. ¹⁶But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸**And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.**

ENGAGE THE WORD

MISUNDERSTANDING PAUL'S MINISTRY, AGAIN

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

In both 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul defends his apostolic ministry several times (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1—4; 2 Corinthians 2—4; 10—13). Unfortunately, the Corinthians resist his teachings. In addition, they often saw Paul as pridefully boasting about his apostolic status and his accomplishments in problematic ways. Certainly, other ministers of the gospel reminded churches of their status in the church as well as their accomplishments, especially by using letters of recommendation that they would carry with them (v. 1). Important churches like the one in Jerusalem gave these letters to traveling missionaries to authenticate their ministry. But the Corinthian church did not need such a letter from Paul. Their very existence as a church was a result of Paul's ministry (v. 3) because Paul founded it (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). Even more than that, the Corinthian church itself was a letter from Christ which Paul had the privilege of delivering to them himself (v. 3). From Paul's point of view, if any church should embrace his ministry, the Corinthian church should.

PAUL'S MINISTRY OF THE SPIRIT 2 Corinthians 3:4-6

Throughout this passage, Paul refers to important written texts which would have used ink or been chiseled into stone. The texts that he has in mind are the letters of recommendation and even the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone (3:1; see also Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15-16). As important as these written texts are, they do not compare to the

Did You Know?

The Greek word translated here as “dull” (*pōroō*, v. 14) is in other places translated as “hardened” (e.g., Romans 11:7). Paul’s most detailed explanation for why his fellow Jews did not accept the gospel message is found in Romans 9–11.

THE NEW COVENANT VS. THE OLD COVENANT

GOD’S UNVEILED COVENANT IN THE SPIRIT

work that God does when He transforms believers by writing a new covenant upon their hearts through His Spirit (3:6, 17-18). Since the church at Corinth is the result of Paul’s ministry, they have experienced life in this new covenant as it arises from God’s Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:7-11

Paul’s teaching on the new covenant has its roots in Jeremiah 31:31-34. For Paul, the original covenant (i.e., the old covenant, 3:14) that God established with His people begins with the giving of the law (Exodus 19–34). On Mount Sinai, God established the nation of Israel as His people with the giving of the law to Moses on stone tablets. To be sure, the giving of the law was a glorious event (3:7-8). But as Jeremiah indicated, it was also transitory. It was transitory because the ministry of the law was unable to bring the full transformation that was hoped for by prophets like Jeremiah. To bring full transformation, God needed to etch the covenant on more than just stone. It needed to be etched on the hearts of His people. For Jeremiah, God promised to do this with the new covenant which, for Paul, was now available to all believers in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Only now could God’s people live out the righteousness that God required of His people. Only now could God’s people hope to be transformed into His image (3:18). So, as glorious it was when God established the old covenant, the new covenant is even more glorious.

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

To help illustrate how exceedingly glorious the new covenant is, Paul focuses on the veil of Moses. According to Exodus 34:29-35, because Moses was in God’s presence when he received the law, his face shown with God’s glory (3:7, 13). When the people saw his face glowing, they were afraid. So, Moses put a veil over his face when he spoke to the Israelites what God had said to him. Paul says, “Now if the ministry

Think About It

Moses placed a veil over his face when the people saw God's glory radiating from it. Paul tells us that Moses used a veil so the people would not see that God's glory was beginning to lose its luster. What a powerful contrast: the fading glory of Moses' face compared to the "surpassing glory" in Jesus (v. 10).

that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, *transitory* though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?" (vv. 7-8, emphasis added). For Paul, Moses' veil symbolized the transitory nature of the old covenant because it did not allow the Israelites to look deeply into God's glory to see the transitory truth of the covenant established at Sinai (3:13). In fact, for Paul, the reason why some Jews have not yet embraced the Christian message is because their minds are still dull because this veil remains. For Paul, only in Christ is the veil taken away (3:14), which happens whenever someone recognizes that God is at work in Christ through the Spirit (3:16-17) and thereby are transformed into the image of the Lord as God intended. However, His people cannot fully live into God's purpose unless they see the transitory nature of the old covenant and see, instead, the full revelation of His glory that is found in Christ. Paul talks about this as freedom (3:17). But this is not a freedom to live as one desires. Instead, it is a freedom to fully live as God intended His people to live with the new covenant written on their hearts through the Holy Spirit.

While the new covenant is glorious and results in a transformed life, believers may still suffer in this life. The glorious treasure we have in Christ remains in "jars of clay" (2 Corinthians 4:7) until we are finally at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8-10). It is this truth that the Corinthians had a hard time embracing. May we not make their mistake and may we embrace the whole truth about the new covenant in Christ.

REFLECT

In what ways can our lives reflect the glory of the Lord to others?

May

12

AMBASSADORS OF RECONCILIATION

*We are created to be ambassadors of Christ
in the ministry of reconciliation.*

THE WORD

2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21 Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹²We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. ¹³If we are “out of our mind,” as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

¹⁶So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

KEY VERSES

¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! **¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

**2 CORINTHIANS
6:1-2**

¹As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in

vain. ²For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.”

I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Few things are more painful than a close relationship that is broken. The only hope in these situations is some form of reconciliation where the broken relationship is healed and restored. The same is true with our relationship with God. As Paul outlines here, when our relationship with God is broken, we need to be reconciled to Him.

DEFENDING PAUL’S APOSTOLIC MINISTRY, AGAIN

2 Corinthians 5:11-13

Once again, Paul needs to defend the nature of his apostolic ministry to the Corinthians. Paul’s ministry is one that is centered on the new covenant made alive by the Holy Spirit. It is also a ministry where there is suffering, but that suffering does not mean that God abandoned Paul. Instead, suffering arises out of God’s purposes for Paul (5:5); for when death is at work in Paul’s ministry, the resurrected life of Jesus is at work in the Corinthians (4:12). Thus, Paul wants the Corinthians to know that though his ministry in this life is characterized by suffering, this earthly life will ultimately give way to a “heavenly dwelling” (5:2) where all believers will be at home with the Lord (5:8). But before this happens, all will “appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that every believer will receive what is due them for things done in the body, whether good or bad” (5:10). In the end, Paul is persuaded that God will affirm his ministry among the Corinthians because it is plain to God (5:11) and comes from the heart (instead of outward appearances, 5:12).

Paul’s greatest desire is that what is plain to God would be clear to the conscience of all Christians, including the Corinthians (5:11). After all, when Paul speaks in his right mind (5:13) through persuasive arguments, he

Did You Know?

The two places where Paul develops the idea of salvation as reconciliation to God is in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Romans 5:1-11. Paul is the only New Testament writer to do so.

is trying to help believers take pride in him and his ministry (5:12). Unfortunately, some in the Corinthian church wanted Paul to confirm his ministry through other means that they thought would be more worthy of a call from God. For example, if Paul focused on ecstatic experiences in which Paul would be seen as out of his mind, then he would have clear evidence that God affirmed his ministry. While Paul did have ecstatic experiences (1 Corinthians 14:1-12) and saw visions (2 Corinthians 12:2-4), Paul is clear that these experiences did nothing to help build up the church (1 Corinthians 14:1-12). Instead, these kinds of experiences were all for God. In contrast, clear, rational arguments like the ones here in this letter are best for building up the church (5:13). Because these arguments show Paul's heart, they should be more persuasive to the Corinthians than outward evidence like ecstatic experiences (2 Corinthians 12:1).

OUT OF LOVE FOR ALL

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

Though the Corinthians struggled to fully embrace the nature of Paul's ministry, modern readers usually do not. We accept Paul's willingness to participate in Jesus' sufferings because we know that it arises out of the important truth proclaimed here. Christ did not die an ordinary death. Rather, out of love for all, Christ died for all and so "all died" (v. 14). In essence, Christ died on behalf of all humanity as its representative. Paul refers to Christ in this way in Romans 5:12-21. There, Paul makes clear that Christ's death overcame sin, death, and the law. Thus, those who believe in Christ and are baptized into His death (Romans 6:1-14) have overcome sin, death, and the law in this life as well. It is because of what Christ did in His death that Paul goes on to say here in 2 Corinthians that Christians should not "live for themselves but for him who died and was raised again" (5:15).

RECONCILIATION IN CHRIST

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

Paul goes on to summarize the benefits of em-

Think About It

Since Adam and Eve's disruptive choices, God has been at work offering reconciliation for broken relationships. It is in His nature to draw people back to himself. Over and over again, as we study the course of biblical history, we find God acting redemptively, offering grace and mercy to any who would hear His voice and restoring those who heed His invitation.

NOW IS THE DAY OF SALVATION

bracing his apostolic ministry where Christ's death is highlighted. First, he talks about believers participating in the new creation (v. 17). All that characterized the old life like sin, death, and the law are no longer. These things have given way to God's new life, His new creation. Second, the world is in the process of being reconciled to God in Christ (v. 19). Thus, believers no longer have their sins counted against them. As Paul stated earlier (5:10), everyone will appear before the judgment seat of Christ and all people will receive what is due them for what they have done in this life. However, those who have been reconciled to God in Christ have nothing to fear. As Paul says elsewhere, "while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son," and so having been reconciled, we will be saved by Christ's life (Romans 5:8-11).

2 Corinthians 5:20—6:2

Paul declares that the day of salvation is now (6:2). This salvation is available the moment that people embrace the appeal that God has made through His ambassadors of reconciliation. That appeal is: "Be reconciled to God" (5:20). Christ, who had no sin, was made to be sin for us. Because of this, we not only can be reconciled to God, but we now experience God's salvation. We don't need to wait to die physically to live into what Christ has done for us. Although this may mean living also into Christ's suffering, there is no reason to "lose heart" (4:16). As ambassadors of reconciliation, "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (4:17). Salvation begins today and will soon be brought to completion when we finally are at home with the Lord (5:8).

REFLECT **H**ow can you be an ambassador of reconciliation to those around you?

May
19

THE GIFT OF GENEROUS GIVING

Sharing the resources God gives us is the privilege and responsibility of being a Christian.

THE WORD

**2 CORINTHIANS
8:1-9**

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.³For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.⁵And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.⁶So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.⁷But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

**2 CORINTHIANS
9:6-12**

KEY VERSES

⁶Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.⁷**Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.**⁸**And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.**⁹As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

¹²This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

ENGAGE THE WORD

PAUL'S COLLECTION FOR THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul turns his attention to the collection that he was organizing for the saints in Jerusalem. From his letters (see also 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; Romans 15:25-29), we learn that Paul asked all of the Gentile churches to collect an offering for the poor in the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:26). The Corinthians had been asked to start collecting funds for this offering a year ago (8:10), but they may have stopped doing so because of the tensions that had developed between them and Paul. Now that they had reestablished their relationship (7:8-9), Paul wanted the church to bring to completion their offering (8:6).

LESSONS ON GENEROSITY FROM THE MACEDONIAN CHURCHES

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

Of course, much like today, Paul needed to be careful in how he asked the Corinthians for money so that they would not misunderstand his intentions, especially since some were concerned about giving to this offering. That is why Paul does not start out with a direct request. Instead, he talks about how God has blessed the Macedonian churches with God's grace (v. 1). Who were these Christians? Paul is likely referring to Christians who were part of churches in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea. Though these churches had experienced a very severe trial, they were overflowing with joy which made them want to give whatever they could to the Jerusalem Christians.

As Paul talks about the Macedonian churches, he highlights several key principles that should charac-

Did You Know?

Paul's co-worker, Titus, was instrumental in gathering the funds for the collection from the Corinthians (8:16-21). He also brought the good news to Paul that the Corinthians were ready to reestablish their relationship with him (7:5-16).

terize all of our giving as Christians. First, our desire to give should come from our desire to be generous because of the blessings that we ourselves have received from God. Even faced with extreme poverty, the Macedonians found ways to generously give to Paul's offering. Here, the call is to be as generous as possible no matter the circumstances. Second, Paul says they gave as much as they were able and beyond (v. 3). While some may be able to give more than others, we should give as God is leading us to give. Third, their choice to give was entirely their own (v. 3). No one should be compelled to give unless directed to do so by God. Fourth, giving is most rewarding when we desire to give in light of the blessings that God had bestowed on us (v. 4). Finally, the Macedonian Christians understood that giving to others is a privilege that allows us to serve the Lord's people in ways that we may not normally be able to do ourselves (v. 4). Although Paul's churches could not minister directly to the Jerusalem Christians, their offering was a way for them to participate from afar. So, too, when we give to missions or compassionate ministry, we are providing resources to others in need when we cannot participate directly in the ministry ourselves.

NOW IT'S THE CORINTHIANS' TURN

2 Corinthians 8:6-9

With the Macedonian churches modeling generosity, Paul is ready to invite the Corinthian Christians to do the same. As the Macedonians had received God's grace, Paul encourages the Corinthians to "bring to completion this act of grace on their part" (v. 6). As God gives His grace to believers, we all can be agents of grace by generously giving to the needs of others. After all, God has already blessed all of us abundantly in everything including in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness (i.e., zeal or willingness to do what is right), and in love. With so many blessings, Paul is virtually saying that those like the Corinthians who have so much still lack one thing, the need

Think About It

The point of giving is not so much the amount we give but why and how we give. God does not want gifts given grudgingly. Instead, He wants us to give out of dedication to Christ, love for fellow believers, the joy of helping those in need, as well as the fact that it is simply the good and right thing to do.

A FINAL PRINCIPLE AROUND GIVING

to “excel in this grace of giving” (v. 7). In fact, if anyone truly is blessed with complete earnestness and a sincere love, they would demonstrate this fact by living a life of generous giving. For the Corinthians, that would mean participating in the offering (v. 8).

2 Corinthians 9:6-12

From 8:10—9:5, Paul continues to provide additional details about the collection in part to dispel any fears that Paul is going to do something inappropriate with the money raised. He also continues to encourage the Corinthians to participate. In 9:6-12, Paul provides a general principle that should guide all Christians as they consider opportunities to give.

In this teaching, Paul uses a farming metaphor. Those who farm sow seed in hopes of reaping a bountiful harvest. However, those who sow sparingly will also reap sparingly. So also the opposite is true. Those who sow generously will also reap generously (v. 6). In essence, the more seed planted, the more that grows and can be harvested. Likewise, Christians should give what they have decided in their hearts to give and, in response, God is able to bless (vv. 7-8). The thought here is not that Christians should give to get. Instead, Christians willingly give to do their part in maintaining God’s economy in which all have what they need and “abound in every good work” (v. 8). In essence, when God enriches us, He does it trusting that we will be generous on every occasion that we can, which then results in all being thankful to God for His generosity (vv. 10-12).

REFLECT How generous are you with the gifts that God has given to you?

WILLIAM MALAS

May
26

GOD'S ALL-SUFFICIENT GRACE

God's grace is sufficient for all our difficulties.

THE WORD

2 CORINTHIANS
12:1-10

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹**But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.** ¹⁰That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

BOASTING TO DEFEND PAUL'S MINISTRY

2 Corinthians 12:1a

One last time, Paul must defend his ministry. This time is different. In 2 Corinthians 2:14—7:4, Paul defended his ministry to those in Corinth who had already restored their relationship to Paul. In his explanation there, Paul could hope that they would hear with new ears what was at stake in Paul's ministry of the new covenant and reconciliation. Here, however, Paul's defense is aimed at a group that was clearly resistant to Paul's ministry and even sought to undermine it. Paul refers to this group as the "super-apostles" (11:5; 12:11) because they boasted about their many external achievements that, for them, confirmed that their understanding of the Christian faith was better than Paul's. In Paul's mind, however, these super-apostles were no apostles at all. Instead, Paul identifies them as "false apostles, deceitful workers," and those who are really "masquerading as apostles of Christ" (11:13). In fact, they are better seen as servants of Satan (11:14-15). But because they like to boast about who they think they are and what they have supposedly accomplished for Christ, Paul seeks to expose them for who they really are. To do so, he decides to play their game by boasting about himself.

Once Paul starts boasting in chapter 11, it quickly becomes clear that Paul is making a mockery of the attempts of the super-apostles to elevate themselves before the Corinthian Christians. Paul does not focus on his status and accomplishments such as his Jewish background or his accomplishments as an apostle (11:21b-29); instead, he highlights the many ways that he has suffered for his faith. For Paul, the only things that he finds meaningful to boast about are those things that show his weakness (11:30-33).

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES 2 Corinthians 12:1b-7a

Although Paul prefers to boast about his weakness, he felt compelled to make mention of his own

Did You Know?

The “thorn in the flesh” was a graphic image referring to something which kept Paul humble and dependent upon the Lord’s grace. The Greek for “thorn” may also be translated “splinter.” Nearly everyone can identify with the discomfort and pain from a thorn or a splinter lodged in the skin. The picture is vivid, despite not knowing exactly what that “thorn” was.

spiritual experiences as well. The super-apostles most likely spoke freely about their own spiritual experiences because the Corinthians were impressed by them. Thus, Paul takes their lead and talks about his. What Paul describes here is interesting but not entirely clear. First, Paul refers to his own experience entirely in the third person by describing what happened to a “man in Christ” (v. 2). Most interpreters see Paul as talking about himself and not someone else. Since Paul is reluctant to even talk about this experience, especially within the context of boasting, he takes the focus off himself by not using first person pronouns (i.e., “I” or “me”). Second, in the experience, Paul was snatched up to the “third heaven” (v. 2) which he later calls “paradise” (v. 4). The significance of this place is not explained. Finally, the kind of experience he had is not clear. As Paul says, he could not tell if it was an in the body experience or an out of body experience (i.e., “apart from the body,” v. 2). Whatever the experience, whether he was physically snatched away or only had a vision is not important. In fact, as Paul says, the experience in and of itself left “nothing to be gained” (v. 1b). For Paul, any ecstatic such experiences are truly only meaningful when they serve to build up the whole community (1 Corinthians 14:1-25).

GOD’S ALL SUFFICIENT GRACE AND POWER

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Some might be frustrated that Paul was given this wonderful vision of heaven, but then dismisses it as unimportant. Yet, we need to remember that this spiritual experience came to Paul at a cost. To keep Paul from becoming conceited, God gave him a “thorn in his flesh.” This thorn was so troublesome that he even calls it a “messenger from Satan” (v. 7b). What exactly this thorn was is not at all clear. Many theories have been put forth to explain what it might be. Some have thought it to be a physical ailment, perhaps affecting his eyes (Galatians 4:13-16). Others have proposed that the thorn is his many opponents in the church-

Think About It

To play the “fool” (2 Corinthians 11:16, 19; 12:6, 11) is not something anyone would willingly want to do in Jewish or Greco-Roman culture. However, by playing the fool, Paul skillfully shows that the super-apostles were the real fools.

es, including the super-apostles themselves. All that is clear is that this thorn stuck with him throughout his ministry. He even “pleaded with the Lord to take it away three times” (v. 8) to no avail. Instead, God allowed it to remain in his life to ensure that Paul’s many accomplishments in Christ would not go to his head.

Paul learned another lesson from the thorn in his flesh which is helpful for all who may desire to have access to God’s grace and power. Access to these things does not come from some special status that we may have or from something special within us. Nor does God provide His grace and power by means of special spiritual experiences. God’s all sufficient grace and power become most real in our lives when we are weak and completely dependent upon Him (v. 9). For, as Paul says, God’s grace is sufficient for His people when we are weak and His power is made perfect in weakness. In essence, God’s power is best seen when we allow Him to work through our weakness. For the super-apostles, these ideas made no sense. For them, God’s grace and power was most evident in the wondrous things that they did in Christ’s name. It was also evident when they had spiritual experiences which they claimed came through the Spirit. But in their testimony about these experiences, the focus always remained on themselves not God. Paul saw through their efforts to puff themselves up before the Corinthians. For him, if Christians want to know God’s grace and power then they will delight in the kinds of things that Paul lists here: “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties” (v. 10). For it is when we are weak that we, through Him, are truly strong.

REFLECT

In what ways have you experienced God’s power and grace when you were truly weak?

WILLIAM MALAS

Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one verse to memorize each month or memorize one verse of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Spring 2024:

1 Corinthians 13:13

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

2 Corinthians 12:9

COMING NEXT QUARTER

SUMMER 2024

Unit 1: Prayers of the Bible

Though prayers are directed from the people to God, they can be theologically rich. In this unit, we'll examine important prayers that were recorded in Scripture in light of the truth they convey and the guidance they provide for our lives.

Unit 2: Revelation: Lessons on True Worship

Throughout the centuries, Bible scholars, theologians, and laypeople have studied the book of Revelation, attempting to understand its message. This study will help you understand that Revelation is not so much about doom and gloom as it is about the worship of God and His redemptive plan for humankind.



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