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“In light of God’s promises to be with us, in this personal and intimate way, and out of reverence for God, ‘let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit.’”



PAUL'S MINISTRY — AN INSPIRATION

PAUL'S FAITHFULNESS IN DIFFICULT TIMES

2 CORINTHIANS 6:3–5

In our previous lesson, we noted that Paul reminded his former parishioners in Corinth that he was God's ambassador. As God's personal representative, he was to inform them that in Christ Jesus, God had cleared the way for them to be reconciled with their Maker (5:19–20). In the opening verses of chapter 6, he stresses the urgency of responding to God's gracious invitation. To get the attention of his readers, Paul twice used the Greek word usually translated “Behold” (v. 2). It has the force of our “Listen Up!” Paul wanted them to “get the message” that this was not something they could put off to another day. Twice he also said “Now!” to emphasize how important it was for them to act *immediately*!

Paul must have suspected that there were probably a few in Corinth who still needed some reassurance about his trustworthiness. He now devotes a short paragraph to deal with this concern. He tells them to please take an objective look at the record of his ministry. If they did, they would see that he had “put no stumbling block in anyone's path so that our ministry will not be discredited” (6:3). The Greek word here translated “no” has the force of an emphatic “NO!” There is “absolutely no” dereliction of duty on Paul's part.

On the contrary, writes Paul, the record shows that his ministry as a servant of God was commendable in every respect (6:4). His rehearsal of the quality of his ministry resembles what he had written in chapter 4:8–12. The apostle refers to all that he had endured through a set of three triads. In the first (v. 4), he mentions things which are quite general: “troubles, hardships and distresses.” In verse 5a, Paul mentions specific examples: “in beatings, imprisonments, and riots,” all things that “happened to him.” The final triad seems to point to those things that Paul took upon himself voluntarily: “in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger” (5b). He wanted the people in Corinth to see this as evidence of total dedication to his ministry. He hoped that this would remove lingering doubts about his trustworthiness.

POSITIVE QUALITIES OF PAUL’S MINISTRY

2 CORINTHIANS 6:6–7

As dramatic as it sounds, Paul’s rehearsal of what he had endured for the sake of the Gospel, wasn’t nearly as impressive as the positive qualities which were strongly in evidence as he ministered to them. Paul writes next about his impeccable moral integrity and the characteristics he demonstrated as a personal emissary of the Most High God.

First on the list for Paul is his personal “purity” (v. 6). The Greek word that Paul used for “purity” has its roots in the word that the Septuagint used when it referred to the Nazarites. Numbers 6:2 informs us that Nazarites “took a vow of separation to the Lord.” Perhaps the most famous Nazarite was Samson (Judges 13). If we keep this in mind, we will better understand what Paul is trying to say here. We know he was not about to say that he was “pure,” in the sense that he never sinned. In 1 Timothy 1:15, he calls himself the worst “(chief: KJV) of sinners.” Yet, when it came to

his apostleship, he was as dedicated to the Lord as a Nazarite. He was truly a person totally “set apart” to do God’s bidding.

The record will also show that Paul’s personal characteristics reflected the mindset of the God whom he represented. At all times, he displayed “understanding, patience and kindness.” Lest someone thinks he’s boasting about himself, Paul quickly makes the disclaimer that if he has the “right stuff” for his divine mission, he can’t take any credit for it. He declares that these traits were “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” and have their roots in the Love of God shown to him by Jesus Christ (v. 6).

He expressed this mindset “in truthful speech and in the power of God” (v. 7). The linkage of the “power of God” to the words Paul spoke suggests that the concept Paul wanted to share in this context was more than just the idea that “he never spoke falsely.” He knew that the primary objective of his ministry was to proclaim faithfully the Word which God had imparted to him — the pure Gospel! This is what led him to declare in his letter to the Romans (1:16 KJV): “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation!”

Paul “wraps up” this thought with the imagery of a military campaign. He asserts that he used “weapons of righteousness.” It’s a blanket statement about the quality and integrity of everything that he did as he worked to advance the Kingdom of God. When he speaks of the weapons “in the right hand and in the left,” Paul, very likely, has in mind a typical soldier of that day. The soldier was properly equipped for battle when he had a sword (offensive) in his right hand and a shield (defensive) in his left. All of his tactics and all of his “tools of the trade” qualify as being appropriate (“righteous”) in the eyes of his “Commander-in-Chief.”

THE IRONY OF IT ALL

2 CORINTHIANS 6:8–10

In the remaining verses of this paragraph, Paul appears to be reaching out to those still not quite sure about him. He lets them know that he understands why they might have been a bit ambivalent about their feelings toward him. His detractors had a lot of impressive ammunition at hand to try to “shoot him down.” Starting with verse 8, Paul mentions some of the negative impressions that they may have gotten regarding him. From a human point of view, Paul had some pretty “bad press.” The conventional wisdom of the day pictured him as a person of “dishonor, bad report...impostor...unknown.”

From another point-of-view, just the opposite could be said about each of the negative labels some had put on him. In reality, Paul had good reports. He was “genuine” and he was “well-known.” Paul himself observed such apparent contradictions and contrasts in his experiences. He comments: “dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (vv. 6–10). It all depends on your viewpoint.

PAUL’S EMOTIONAL APPEAL

2 CORINTHIANS 6:11–13

In this section, Paul provides insight on his experiences in the ministry and reason for his emotional outburst. He wanted to “showcase” the depth of his love for these Corinthians and to let them know he was deeply hurt that they were not returning that love. Paul said he had spoken with complete candor and had really “opened up” to them. This experience also made him aware of the depth and extent of his affection for them. He calls them, “my children,” making a fervent appeal for a “fair exchange” in which they would reciprocate (v. 13). He begs them “Open wide your hearts also.”

SOME ADVICE ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

2 CORINTHIANS 6:14 – 7:1

There is a strong feeling in some circles that Paul did not write this paragraph. They point to the sudden change of subject matter and the observation that there are at least eight words used here which do not appear anywhere else in Paul’s writings. Yet, if we remember Paul had just finished his emotional appeal to the

Corinthians to “open their hearts” to him, we can see that there is a completely logical sequence for what might seem to be out of context. Ever the pastor, Paul realized the danger of being too free in opening one’s heart to another. In fact, this might be a subtle hint from him that they had not been as careful as they should have been concerning the “con artists” who turned them against their former pastor.

His first bit of advice is: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” Paul looks for support to a passage from the Old Testament. God had used a variety of ceremonial regulations to help his people to “get the picture” of how He wanted them to think about their special relationship with Him. This particular injunction from Deuteronomy 22:10 said: “Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together.” You wonder if any self-respecting Israelite farmer would need such a directive. At best, it would be a ridiculous sight to see a tiny Palestine donkey taking its place under a cumbersome yoke, paired with a huge ox triple its weight and height. With this cartoon-like scene, God wants to “highlight” a serious truth about the uniqueness of God’s “chosen ones.” They were to be a “people” completely “set apart” — not a “mixture!”

Paul may have been thinking about the way in which he believed his beloved people in Corinth had been “charmed” into listening to the itinerant teachers who had come to their church. They were pretty “slick operators.” Or he may simply have had in mind his assessment of the very dangerous “spiritual climate” in Corinth. With the picture of a “yoke,” Paul has in mind a close intimate relationship. The idea of a believer being joined together in a close and intimate personal relationship with a non-believer makes as much sense as yoking together a small donkey with a large muscular ox. Not only would it be non-productive; it would be risky and dangerous for all involved.

In many ways, Christians today may need this warning even more than the believers in Paul’s day. For us as individuals, Paul’s advice raises a red flag about any carelessness on our part as we move into personal and close relationships. Parents of teenagers and young adults instinctively and rightfully are concerned about the character and upbringing of the friends with whom their offspring “hang out.” But it’s not only impressionable youth who need this admonition. People of all ages are susceptible to influences that could put their relationship with God “at risk.” The apostle Paul is quite specific here when he cautions against the believers being “yoked together with unbelievers.” The very phrase “intimate relationships” calls to mind the closest and most intimate of all relationships — that of marriage. No matter how much pastors counsel young people about the risks of developing close ties with someone who is not a believer, so many young people don’t take this seriously. They’re convinced that “love will conquer all.” Thank God, some have led unbelieving partners “to the Lord.” Some are able, with the Holy Spirit’s help, to remain true to their God. But more often, the believer’s faith and loyalty are seriously compromised.

Although close personal relationships may be the most influential, evil influences don’t come only from people with whom we might associate. It almost seems that Satan and his

cohorts have taken over the world of entertainment. Think of the most-watched programs in Prime-Time. Most of them use homosexuality as their “stock in trade” source of comedy and treat it as though it is something perfectly “O.K.” Sex is no longer treated as a sacred relationship between married people. It is more often portrayed as a socially acceptable adult recreation between “consenting adults.” Women are commonly portrayed as sex objects, who are expected to “put out” if not on the first date, surely by the second or third. “Living together” before marriage is represented as the socially acceptable way to go. The “sense of the holy,” in general, is conspicuous by its absence. Take the sacred Name of God! One of the most common lines that scriptwriters give to the performers to express surprise is “Oh — my — God!” When God’s name is so blatantly used in vain, the sacred edge is dulled for us when we go to use it in prayer! All of us will want to use discretion when it comes to whom or what we allow to become an intimate part of our daily lives.

As Paul makes the application to the believer’s life, he uses several hypothetical questions to point to the inappropriateness of alliances between believers and unbelievers. What do they have in common: (“righteousness and wickedness,” “light and darkness,” “Christ and Belial,” (vv. 14–15)? In verse 16, Paul steps it up a notch to ask,

“What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” His personal application is quick and precise. He reminds us that we need to keep in mind at all times that “we are the temple of the living God.” He adduces some passages of the Old Testament Scripture to support this truth and puts the stamp of God on it by adding “says the Lord Almighty” (vv. 17–18). It was God Himself giving fatherly advice. “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters.” We need to pick upon the remarkable truth being set forth here in this verse. God doesn’t say that He will be “like a father” to us. His promise is that He will be a true father to us and that His very nature will be passed on to us. He will give us His spiritual DNA, enabling us to develop God-like personality traits as we grow and mature spiritually.

Paul’s concluding word of advice is simple and to the point (7:1). In light of God’s promises to be with us, in this personal and intimate way, and out of reverence for God, “let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit.” Note that in this directive, Paul includes himself. God lays on us the personal responsibility to be good caretakers of the new life He has given us. We are to avoid those things that are not consistent with our new nature as the very sons and daughters of God. Rather, we will actively expose ourselves to whatever will promote our lifelong venture of “perfecting holiness.”



To further promote healing in their relationship, Paul adds what we refer to today as “positive reinforcement.” He tells them that he has “great confidence” that they will continue in their loyalty to Jesus and to him. He says he is “greatly encouraged.”



PAUL’S FINAL PLEA FOR FULL ACCEPTANCE

2 CORINTHIANS 7:2–4

Paul now returns to the very personal matter which he had brought up earlier (6:13). Here he appeals to them again, “Make room for us in your hearts.” He reminds them that they can do this without any mental reservation, because “We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one” (7:2). Just to be sure that nobody will construe what he says as criticism and become “defensive” toward him, Paul reassures them that this is not his intention. He tells them of the place they have always had in his heart: “We would live or die with you.”

In some translations of the Bible (KJV & RSV), the words “die” and “live” are reversed giving a unique Christian twist. He is bound to them in Christian fellowship and love that would continue through death and last throughout eternal life!

To further promote healing in their relationship, Paul adds what we refer to today as “positive reinforcement.” He tells them that he has “great confidence” that they will continue in their loyalty to Jesus and to him. He says he is “greatly encouraged.” His spirit has been renewed and his enthusiasm for ministry restored because of them. Even though he had some painful moments, their return to him filled him with “joy that knows no bounds.” What a great “role model” he is for conscientious pastors. We see his patience, his love for God’s people, and the way he finds his greatest joy in the spiritual progress of his parishioners! He is a powerful inspiration to all of us to grow in our appreciation of those traits in the men of God sent to minister to us!

PERSONAL APPLICATION*2 CORINTHIANS 7:5–8:12*

Dear God, help me to put my “spiritual radar” to work as I study this lesson, searching for a personal message from You. Help me to hear what You want me to hear. Give me the resolve to follow any path of service You want me to take. Thank You for my life in Christ. Amen.

Review

1. Paul went to Troas after he sent Titus to Corinth with his “severe” letter (2 Cor. 2:12). Locate Troas on a Bible lands map. On what body of land was it situated?

2. What did Paul intend to do in Troas? (2:12) How does Paul describe the reception his message received in Troas and why did he leave?

2 Corinthians 7:5–7

3. Was this the first trip Paul ever made from Troas to Macedonia? (Acts 16:8–11) What moved Paul to go to Macedonia the first time?

Skim through Acts 16 and 17; find the names of three cities in Macedonia where Paul started churches (circle the two to which Paul wrote letters).

1.

2.

3.

4. Paul does not tell us here (7:5–7) in which city of Macedonia he stayed while waiting for Titus. How did things go with Paul while he was there?

5. What was it that finally brought Paul comfort and joy? (7:6–7)

What does he say about the depth of the joy their new attitude brought him?

2 Corinthians 7:8–16

6. What does Paul tell the Corinthians about the way he felt in his heart as he thought of sending a letter that he knew was going to “hurt” them?

What had Paul told them earlier in this letter? (2:2)

What explanation does Paul give for sending the letter even though he knew it would pain them and why was he now “happy” he had? (7:8–10)

7. In verses 7:11–12, Paul points to the remarkable personal changes that their “godly sorrow” had brought about. Paul pointed to this as evidence that they had truly experienced an “extreme makeover.” What added blessing would this bring about for them (7:12b)?

What effect did this have on Paul’s personal morale and who else was blessed (7:13–16)?

2 Corinthians 8:1–5

8. For what outstanding Christian “grace” on the part of the Macedonians did Paul speak words of praise (8:2)?

The people of the Macedonian churches had shown grace and supported what relief effort (8:4; 1 Corinthians 16:1; Romans 15:25–26)?

Evidently Paul had not planned to bring the appeal to the Macedonians. From verse 2, list the two terms Paul uses to describe their circumstances.

According to verses 8:3b–4, how was it that they became involved?

What does Paul say in verse 5 was the crucial dynamic behind their generosity?

2 Corinthians 8:6–12

9. When had the Corinthians first heard about the collection (8:6–10; 1 Corinthians 16:1)?

In verse 9, what important truth does he tell them to think about so that a willing heart and a generous spirit might be theirs?

Which word (v. 9a) describes what led Jesus to do what he did?

10. What does Paul say gave him an optimistic feeling about their response (8:7)?

To be acceptable, what attitude must accompany a gift (v. 12)?

11. What was helpful to you in this lesson?
