

2 Corinthians Devotionals

2 Corinthians Devotionals Today in the Word

2 Corinthians 1

2 Corinthians 1:1-2

You know the depth of my love for you. - 2 Corinthians 2:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

Have you ever had to write a very painful letter? Perhaps you have a child who has strayed from the Lord, or a dear Christian friend who is resisting the Lord in some way. You know the anguish that goes into writing such a letter. This depth of emotion is exactly what we find in 2 Corinthians, our focus for this month. This is one of Paul's most personal letters. As Bible scholar Scott Hafemann writes, "To know this letter is to be moved by Paul's life."

The relationship between Paul and the Corinthians was complicated and often painful. Having spent eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11), Paul continued to correspond with these believers. In fact, what we know as 2 Corinthians is actually one of at least four letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthians. The first letter warned against sexual immorality and is referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9. The second letter, what we know as 1 Corinthians, was most likely in response to a letter from the Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 7:1). At the same time, however, Paul had also received disturbing reports from Chloe's household (1 Cor. 1:11) and Apollos (1 Cor. 16:12).

So Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, delivered by Timothy. Despite this letter, serious problems continued. So Paul wrote a third letter, the painful, tearful letter mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:4. Apparently, this letter had the effect Paul intended, for Paul was greatly encouraged by the news that Titus brought upon his return from delivering this letter (2 Cor. 7:13). Even so, Paul had many more things to say, which brings us to what we know as 2 Corinthians. Clearly Paul never gave up on this troubled church!

With this background, it might be surprising that Paul identifies these believers as "saints"—there don't seem to be many halos on these people! The Bible, however, uses "saint" to refer to those who are set apart for God's purposes. Despite serious problems in Corinth, these were still God's chosen ones.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Letters often "come alive" when we know the circumstances under which they were written. For example, Paul's status as an apostle was challenged in Corinth, which explains why he added "by the will of God" to the title apostle in verse 1. Using a Bible dictionary or handbook, take some time during this month's study to learn about ancient Corinth and the situation Paul faced with the church there. If you are using a study Bible, be sure to read the introduction to 1 Corinthians as well as 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 1:3ff

Comforting Others

In 2 Cor. Paul speaks of his suffering for the purpose of comforting. Many times we go through suffering in order to comfort others.

Dr. Mitchell shared the story of a woman who had a 6-month old baby. One bright day, the mother was in the kitchen with the baby in her arms—the baby died there in her arms. Her husband, a pastor, a funeral director tried to take the dead baby away from his mother. The mother would not give him up. A little lady two blocks away heard of this. She had lost her baby six months previously. She came over and sat with the woman. She didn't try to take the baby, but began to tell of her experiences and how her baby was in Heaven with Jesus and she, too, would go there one day. Without saying a word, the woman handed her the baby. She took him in to the father, came back, and both on their knees were praying. She was able to comfort her because of her own suffering. Source unknown

2 Corinthians 1:3 Luke 6:27-36

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. - 2 Corinthians 1:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Justice appeared to be served, and Nathan “Boo” Herring got what he deserved. The 19-year-old man from Steubenville, Ohio, received a sentence of two life terms without parole for his role in the murders of two college students, Aaron Land and Brian Muha. At the sentencing, Brian’s mother Rachel spoke.

“If you hadn’t done this, I would have my Brian and you would have your freedom,” she said calmly. “But losing your freedom is not as bad as losing your soul.” She then asked Herring to devote the rest of his years on earth to good before blessing him and assuring him she would pray for him.

When Jesus spoke of loving your enemies, could He possibly have meant forgiving and praying for the murderer of your child? This sounds impossible—and it is, without the power of the Holy Spirit. But because the Spirit bears fruit in us, Jesus could indeed expect such a supernatural response of kindness and goodness. This is the fruit of the Spirit we are considering today.

Our society associates kindness and goodness with sweet little old ladies and children who play nicely with others. While good behavior and graciousness are certainly admirable traits, the fruit of the Spirit goes well beyond courtesy. Jesus is talking about exercising kindness and goodness to people who hate you, curse you, mistreat you (vv. 27–28). As anyone who has experienced a slight from someone else knows, we naturally want to respond to others in the same way that they’ve treated us. What gives Jesus the right to ask us to behave differently?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Responding with kindness and goodness isn’t easy—if it were, it wouldn’t be a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

You are a gracious and merciful God. - Nehemiah 9:31

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to Nigerian pastor Michael Okonkwo, author of *Controlling Wealth God's Way*, “[M]any are ignorant of the fact that God has already made provision for his children to be wealthy here on earth. When I say wealthy, I mean very, very rich ... It's not a sin to desire to be wealthy.”

No doubt the Corinthian church would have loved this message. As you may recall from our September study through the book of Acts, Corinth was a wealthy commercial center. It attracted fortune seekers from all over the Roman Empire. The city's emphasis on status, wealth, success, and power spilled into the church. Many believed they were already experiencing the eternal blessings promised in Scripture. The gospel was about success, not suffering. In fact, Paul's extensive sufferings caused some to doubt that he was truly an apostle.

This explains why Paul focused so much on suffering in these opening verses of his letter. Most likely, Paul had his own sufferings primarily in view. To challenge the Corinthians' faulty ideas, Paul linked his own suffering with Christ's suffering (v. 5). Far from disqualifying Paul as a true apostle, his sufferings affirmed his unity with the Lord.

Yet Paul's focus on his own sufferings certainly didn't exclude others' suffering. If Jesus Christ and His apostles had to suffer, then surely no believer is exempt. The Corinthians needed to be reminded of this essential aspect of the Christian life.

Given the reality of suffering, today's passage offers three helpful lessons for coping. First, we see that only one perspective truly counts in suffering: there is no limit to the comfort that God provides. Indeed, He is the very source, or Father, of compassion. Second, God not only comforts us, but enables us to comfort others. Like most things in life, it's difficult to share something with others that we've not already experienced. Third, suffering is not some random event or streak of bad luck. Instead, suffering is God's means of producing patient endurance.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Certainly God wants the best for His children. Yet the gospel is not about what we can get in life, but rather what we can give—our very lives. And in a fallen world hostile to God, that often involves various kinds of suffering. So we need never be ashamed of those (including ourselves) who suffer. Instead, today's passage exhorts us to comfort others as we've been comforted. It's interesting to note that the English word for comfort comes from a Latin word that means “make strong together.”

2 Corinthians 1:8-11

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. - Acts 9:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

On New Year's Eve 1943, German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the following from a Nazi prison: "I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil, even out of the greatest evil... I believe that God will give us all the strength we need to help us resist in all time of distress. But he never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on him alone." Perhaps Bonhoeffer had the words of the apostle Paul from today's passage in mind.

Yesterday we saw that Paul's suffering caused some to question his apostolic status. The desire to correct the Corinthians' erroneous thinking probably explains why Paul continued to focus on his suffering for a few more verses. Not only had Paul suffered as Christ had suffered, but his experience in the Roman province of Asia took him to the brink of death. The "sentence of death" (v. 9) could indicate some type of imprisonment, or it could be used figuratively to indicate the severity of Paul's suffering. Yet it was precisely at this point that he experienced God's resurrection power (v. 9). It's no coincidence that Paul's words here remind us of Jesus' suffering on the cross and the power of God who raised Him. The status-conscious Corinthians might have equated power with wealth and success. Instead, Paul showed that God's power was revealed to those who desperately depended upon Him.

Scholars aren't really sure which hardship Paul had in mind in this passage. There are several possibilities, although perhaps the most likely is the riot against Paul in Ephesus, led by the silversmith Demetrius (see Acts 19:23-41). Some have suggested an imprisonment not mentioned in Acts, but alluded to in 2 Corinthians 11:23. Others have suggested some severe illness that nearly took Paul's life. Whatever may have been the circumstance, it taught Paul the utter futility of relying upon oneself and the need to rely on God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Corinth was filled with self-made people. Among its citizens were many freed slaves who had worked hard to make a name and fortune for themselves and their families. Such an environment nurtured an independent, self-reliant mindset. For those who live in the United States, this is a familiar way of thinking. Many people believe that "God helps those who help themselves" is found in the Bible! Instead, today's passage teaches us that God sometimes uses severe hardship to show us that we must depend fully upon Him.

2 Corinthians 1:12-22

God is not a man, that he should lie. - Numbers 23:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to a 1991 poll, 32 percent of Americans believe that their pastor has lied to them. Moral weakness among religious leaders has become fairly widespread. In fact, there's a perception among many that clergy are untrustworthy and after people's money. According to Paul's opponents, such a perception perfectly described him. His frequent change in travel plans showed that he was fickle. Even worse, philosophers and religious leaders were supposed to show the way to the good, virtuous life—Paul's sufferings and his apparent change of mind were major strikes against his credibility in Corinth.

This may explain why Paul began speaking, somewhat abruptly, about boasting. This would have hit home in Corinth, where people boasted in their status, wealth, and power. Yet notice how Paul redefined boasting. First, he boasted about his holiness and sincerity. Second, God's grace, not worldly wisdom, was the basis of his boast. Such transparency was unheard of, yet it showed Paul's conviction that he had nothing to hide. Paul was confident that when the Corinthians understood his motives, they too would boast, or have confidence, in him as well.

Paul then began to defend his changed plans. He had originally planned to visit Corinth twice, once on his way to Macedonia, and then again on his return. In this way, the Corinthian church might benefit, or be blessed, two times.

These plans were made with all integrity before the Lord. In fact, Paul's plans were consistent with the Lord's own faithfulness (v. 18). Everything that God promised in the Old Testament is fulfilled, or is "yes," in Christ. This same God was preached among the Corinthians and made them stand firm. This God anointed and sealed them (as a sign of ownership). He also gave them the Spirit, as a deposit guaranteeing what's to come. This focus on God's promises reminded the Corinthians that God could be trusted completely and implied that Paul's changed plans were in line with God's faithfulness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul's confidence was rooted in his integrity. His conscience was clear when it came to his conduct among the Corinthians. This is a powerful statement. Little compromises chip away at our confidence. Although we may be misunderstood or falsely accused as Paul was, we still need to do all that we can to ensure that our consciences are clear. As you prepare for another week in the office, at school, or in the home, pray that you conduct yourself in such a way that your conscience remains clear.

2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4

Many of the Corinthians who heard him believed. - Acts 18:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the most painful experiences in life is to be misunderstood by loved ones. Paul's love for the Corinthians was profound. Recall from our study in September that Paul spent over eighteen months in Corinth, despite great opposition. In fact, so great was resistance to the gospel that the Lord encouraged Paul in a vision not to give up on this wicked city. With the arrival of Silas and Timothy, Paul devoted himself fully to ministering to the Corinthians. It must have been hard for Paul to leave Corinth, although he knew that the gospel compelled him to go forward. Even so, Paul's deep affection for the Corinthians never wavered: in 1 Corinthians 16:6-7 Paul wrote that he hoped to spend extended time with them, perhaps even an entire winter.

Apparently, Paul had been forced to make an emergency visit to Corinth, a trip not recorded in Acts. During this visit, Paul likely had to confront and discipline church members who were challenging his apostolic authority. It's important to understand that Paul wasn't concerned for his own reputation. Rather, an attack on his authority jeopardized the entire church, because it was ultimately an attack on God's authority.

Because this emergency visit had been painful, and had not produced the repentance that Paul sought, he was understandably reluctant to make a second visit, wanting to spare the church further pain (v. 23). As an apostle Paul could have forced, or "lording over," the church to comply with his petition. Instead, out of love, he chose humility and restraint and postponed his visit. In lieu of a visit, Paul wrote "out of great distress and anguish," hoping that a letter might accomplish his redemptive purposes.

Imagine his anguish when his opponents claimed that his change of plans revealed a fickle instability that disqualified him from being a true apostle! Motives rooted in unselfish love had been twisted in a most untrue way.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Throughout our study, we'll see numerous signs of spiritual maturity. Today's passage shows the wisdom of knowing when to push forward and when to hold back. Sometimes we stick with a set plan, convinced that any deviation indicates we're being wishy-washy. Paul's example suggests otherwise. Scholar Ben Witherington writes, "Sometimes a foolish consistency leads away from what God is urging in a particular situation. Paul's example suggests that one must learn when to follow a plan and when to depart from it."

2 Corinthians 2

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

You have not brought back the strays. - Ezekiel 34:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a 2005 interview in Christianity Today, Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries describes an effective example of church discipline. A man was persuading elderly members to invest in a risky business venture. After receiving thousands of dollars, the man failed to deliver the promised investment return. Church leaders began to confront the man, and eventually persuaded him to return the money or face formal discipline. The man did return the money, but the greater outcome was his eventual repentance from a lifestyle of financially defrauding others. He himself requested to confess his sin publicly before the congregation.

Church discipline can be controversial, but it's intended to bring about repentance and restoration. The Corinthians had responded to Paul's painful letter requesting that a certain individual be disciplined (v. 6). Some commentators have suggested that this was the man who had committed incest (see 1 Cor. 5:1-13). It seems more likely that this is the one who had been slandering Paul and disregarding his authority. Although the Corinthians had complied with Paul's request, they were apparently having a hard time restoring the person who had been disciplined. Discipline is only one half of the coin; the other half must include forgiveness and love.

Paul's example here is powerful. It's clear that Paul wasn't demanding this individual's discipline to be spiteful. He knew that this person's actions were ultimately destructive to the entire church. That is why obedience in everything (v. 9) was so essential.

Paul's goal all along had been redemptive. Although he had been the one wronged, he took the lead in forgiveness. Knowing the human tendency to hold grudges or to shun those who have sinned, Paul also stressed the necessity of loving forgiveness on the part of the Corinthians toward this individual. Paul's mention of Satan in verse 11 reminds us that far beyond personal offenses and

sins against one another is another much more serious threat to the unity of the church.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

C. S. Lewis once said, "We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it." It's so easy not to forgive those who have been caught in sin. Yet we must never forget that the body of Christ is under constant spiritual attack. Even though "the gates of Hades will not overcome" the church, we need to make every effort to extend forgiveness to the repentant and to seek their full restoration. Failure to do so leaves an open door for an all-too-ready adversary.

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

I am being poured out like a drink offering. - Philippians 2:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Imagine combining the frenzy of a World Cup soccer match with the pomp of a royal ceremony. This barely begins to describe a Roman triumph. Victorious generals were awarded the privilege of parading through Rome, dressed in purple and gold robes. First, the conquered king, followed by his children, their tutors and servants, other family members, and eventually, the conquered king's army were paraded past jeering spectators. Terrified, they marched to either death or slavery. Then, the general appeared, eliciting cheers from the crowd, followed by his army, singing his praises.

The Corinthians would have loved this powerful imagery, naturally assuming that it pictured their triumphant victory in Christ. Imagine their shock when Paul portrayed himself as the conquered enemy! This is more clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 4:9—"God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena." Why would Paul align himself with the condemned?

Paul clearly understood that as God's enemy, he had been defeated. His life now was being poured out so that the power of the gospel might be displayed through him. Just as the cross is at the core of the gospel, so also Paul's suffering was at the core of his ministry. As one Bible scholar writes, "To encounter Paul in his suffering on behalf of his churches is to encounter a picture of the crucified Christ."

Such thinking was offensive to the Corinthians. In contrast to their focus on power and eloquence, Paul stressed humility and suffering. Furthermore, the Corinthians would have seen Paul's anxiety-ridden decision to leave Troas as weakness. Ironically, his concern to find Titus, and with him news about the Corinthians, caused him to pass up an opportunity for the gospel. Once again, love and not instability drove Paul. Moreover, unlike disreputable marketplace peddlers, Paul wasn't "selling" the gospel for a profit. Instead, his very life was poured out that the gospel might advance.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

By now it should be clear that the intensity of Paul's suffering was part of his calling as an apostle. Yet today's passage shows that when our lives are offered up to God as the aroma of Christ, knowledge of God will spread around like perfume. For some, this will be like a sweet aroma that draws them nearer; for others, it will be like a foul stench that repels. Either way, our desire is to be that fragrance of Christ wherever God might lead us.

2 Corinthians 2:14 Psalm 28

Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. - 2 Corinthians 2:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

In her book *Radical Gratitude*, Evelyn Vaughn recounts the experience of Colonel Brian Birdwell, who was working at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. When the hijacked plane slammed into the building, Brian was just yards away from point of impact and found himself almost immediately engulfed in flames. He tried to get up or roll over, but he was unable to do so. As Brian's body burned, he was overcome with intense pain and realized that he was about to die. So he lay there, crying out to Jesus and preparing to see His Lord face to face. Then, he began to feel water running over him—the automatic sprinkler system had come on and was extinguishing the flames on Brian's body. For the next few months, Brian drifted in and out of consciousness. Today he remembers very little—except for how grateful he was to be alive. This gratitude sustained him through numerous operations and painful rehabilitation. He and his wife, Mel, started a ministry that reaches out to other burn victims, offering comfort and hope.

A similar type of gratitude is found in Psalm 28. The exact circumstances that led David to write this psalm are unknown, although the first part of the psalm suggests that he was facing a severe trial. He cries out to the Lord in complete recognition of his utter dependence on God's mercy and help (v. 2). Verses 3 through 5 indicate that David was facing an unjust situation, perhaps having to endure those who deceived him or were actively wronging him.

The next three verses (vv. 6-8) make it clear that the Lord heard David's plea and delivered him. In these verses, David again

acknowledges his complete dependence upon God. As we have seen in previous studies, there is a strong connection between recognizing our need of God, praising Him for His work in our lives, and giving thanks to Him (v. 8).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you would like to read about other accounts like Brian Birdwell about giving thanks in the midst of trying circumstances, read *Radical Gratitude: Discovering Joy through Everyday Thankfulness*, by Evelyn Vaughn (available online or at a Christian bookstore). Here you'll find one woman's journey toward understanding the life-changing impact of gratitude as she dealt with the death of her mother. You will also find many practical suggestions for cultivating gratitude in your own life.

2 Corinthians 3

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

You are a letter from Christ. - 2 Corinthians 3:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to the Web site, jobsearch.about.com, it's important to find the right person to write a letter of recommendation. "A less than positive reference can cause as much harm as a negative reference." A good letter should specify how long the person recommending you has known you, and in what capacity. Specific details about your skills and job performance are key. It's also helpful to describe specific attributes that set you apart. For many employers, excellent letters of recommendation are important factors for those they hire.

Letters of recommendation were also essential in the ancient world. In the Roman Empire, people were either patrons (those with power and resources) or clients (those who needed patrons and gave them status and honor). Patrons provided letters of recommendation for clients. One could also commend oneself, which would be like presenting one's own credentials.

But who needs recommendation letters to establish a relationship among close friends? It's likely that Paul's opponents were suggesting that Paul didn't have the right credentials. Paul's two rhetorical questions (v. 1) reveal just how strained things had become with the Corinthians. Paul wasn't against letters of recommendation—they were (and are) a necessary part of life. But surely his relationship with the Corinthians had gone well beyond the need for third-party referrals!

If the Corinthians wanted such letters, they had only to look at their very lives. Bible scholar C. F. D. Moule aptly wrote that Paul's credentials were "not on paper but in persons." In fact, the Corinthians were letters from Christ, who had been written upon their very lives. Their existence as "letters of Christ" was dependent upon Paul's ministry. Moreover, they were "letters" written by the Spirit upon their hearts, not in ink upon stones. These last two images anticipate Paul's discussion of the new covenant in the following verses. Thus to deny Paul also denied the work of the new covenant that God had been accomplishing in their hearts.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever thought that your life is actually a "letter from Christ"? Your life is a testimony to those who brought you to Christ and who instructed you in the faith. Your life bears witness to the Spirit's power at work in you. Your life is also a letter "known and read by everybody" (v. 2). Take some time this week to consider what kind of "letter" you are. What kind of recommendation does your life give to Christ? It's a sobering thought!

2 Corinthians 3:4-11

Our competence comes from God. - 2 Corinthians 3:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Some people's business cards have a lot of letters following their names—M.D., Ph.D., J.D., M.B.A., C.E.O., C.F.O. Paul could have put together a pretty persuasive business card himself! *Philippians 3:5-6* tells us that Paul was "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews," and a Pharisee. Pretty impressive!

Yet Paul didn't consider such credentials to have great importance. As we saw yesterday, it wasn't letters of recommendation that counted, but rather letters of Christ written in human hearts. These lives, together with the knowledge that only God could make him competent for his calling, gave Paul great confidence. Indeed, his calling was to be a minister of the new covenant. Mention of the new covenant reminds us of the covenant that God enacted with Moses at Sinai. Like Paul, Moses didn't rely upon his own competence. He knew that he was inadequate to be the mediator of that covenant, due to an apparent speech impediment (see *Ex. 4:10*).

The contrast between the Spirit and the letter has caused much debate. It's more than a simple contrast between the law and the gospel, because Scripture makes it clear that the law is good and perfect.

Instead, because the letter is written on stone tablets, it is unable to impart life. The Spirit indwells people and enables them to do what is otherwise impossible, namely, obey the law. Apart from the Spirit, the law is lifeless.

This point led Paul to contrast the glory that came with the giving of the law at Sinai and the glory that accompanies the new covenant.

It's rather amazing that Paul could say that the ministry of Sinai brought death, but this underscores human inability to keep the law, which brought about condemnation and death. To be sure, there was glory that accompanied this covenant, but it could not compare with the glory of the new covenant.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's worth repeating that the law is good. It's human effort to keep the law that brings death. Obedience is only possible through the indwelling Spirit's power. Even so, many Christians think that it's up to them to walk in obedience. Rather than humbly acknowledging their own inability, they try harder and harder, and often end up more and more defeated. How about you? Are you trying to fulfill the requirements of God's law apart from His Spirit? If so, today's passage shows that there's a better way.

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

We bear the likeness of the man from heaven. - 1 Corinthians 15:49

TODAY IN THE WORD

The sight was terrifying. Moses' face was radiant, glowing in a supernatural way. Aaron and the others backed away from him, unable to bear the sight. It was enough that Moses had gone back up the holy mountain to receive a new set of stone tablets. (He had smashed the first set when he returned from God's presence only to find the people engaged in gross idolatry.) But to have his face radiant like that was more than the people could bear—Moses had to wear a veil to cover his shining face!

It's hard to imagine what Moses' glowing face must have looked like, despite several attempts by Hollywood! It's also been hard for Bible scholars to explain why Moses hid his face with a veil. Some suggest that Moses was trying to hide his fading glory, but Exodus 34:29-35 doesn't indicate that Moses was trying to cover anything up. Another explanation is that Israel's persistently hardened heart made it impossible for them to see any measure of God's glory, even reflected off Moses' face. To see God's glory with such hardened hearts would have brought about their judgment. So it's more probable that Moses hid his face to protect the people, given their rebellious state.

This background helps us to understand Paul's comparison in today's passage between the glory that shone from Moses' face and the glory that now shines from the unveiled faces of believers. The Israelites couldn't see God's glory reflected on Moses' face because of the hardness of their hearts. That hardness can only be removed by Christ. That's why the veil remained for Jews in Paul's day (v. 15). Recall how resistant the Corinthian Jews were to the preaching of the gospel (Acts 18:5-6). But whenever anyone turns to Christ, the veil covering God's glory is removed. What was once possible only for Moses has now been made possible for all who turn to Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's passage says that, as believers, we all reflect the Lord's glory with unveiled faces. This is a lifelong process. We're continually being transformed into Christ's likeness. Romans 12:2 exhorts us to transform our thinking so that we are no longer living according to worldly standards. Galatians 5:22-23 gives further indications of a life being transformed in accordance with the Lord's likeness. Consider memorizing these verses as you pray that the Spirit will enable you to yield more fully to His transforming work.

2 Corinthians 4

2 Corinthians 4

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. - 2 Corinthians 4:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

One classic praise song proclaims: "We can only know the power that He holds when we truly see how deep our weakness goes.

His strength in us begins when ours comes to an end—He hears our humble cry and proves again: His strength is perfect when our strength is gone, He'll carry us when we can't carry on. Raised in His power, the weak become strong. His strength is perfect, His strength is perfect."

"His Strength Is Perfect" is the encouraging motto for every Christian, and it was a foundation stone in the faith of the apostle Paul. We saw this truth yesterday in the story of Eutychus, and we see it as well in 2 Corinthians (written about 55 A.D.). The main point of today's reading is straightforward: the power for service comes from God, not us. Paul's goal was simple—"setting forth the truth plainly" (v. 2). When he faced opposition, he went on shining the light of the knowledge of Christ all around.

The same God who created physical light also brings spiritual enlightenment (vv. 5-6). The gospel is a "treasure" which God has entrusted to us "jars of clay." It is precisely this weakness and frailty, though, that highlights the strength of Christ in us to endure being hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and even struck down. This "all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (vv. 7-9).

The paradox is that to reveal the life of Jesus we must carry within us the death of Jesus (vv. 10-12). This suggests that we die to ourselves in order to live for Christ and that we have the privilege of sharing in Christ's sufferings; that is, His sufferings flow over into our lives (John 12:24-25; Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10). Therefore, what we do for the sake of the gospel we do in light of eternity and in the hope and confidence that Christ's resurrection power will sustain us (v. 17).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Can you relate to verses 8-9? At this time in your life, are you feeling hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, or even struck down? Be encouraged—the same Paul who wrote those verses also wrote: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). To encourage yourself, fix the eyes of your heart on today's reading, verses 17-18, which speak of an "eternal glory that far outweighs" all our "light and momentary troubles."

2 Corinthians 4:1-5

I am among you as one who serves. - Luke 22:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

When the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon died in 1892, over 100,000 people lined the streets as his casket was transported from the Metropolitan Tabernacle to the cemetery. Yet despite his popularity, Spurgeon was often criticized for his passionate, salt-of-the-earth style. He was even called "the pulpit buffoon." In an era that prized polite society, Spurgeon refused to water down the gospel message. He once wrote, "My firm conviction is that we have had enough polite preachers."

The same could be said for the apostle Paul. In Paul's day, it was not uncommon for traveling philosophers to delight audiences with clever arguments and powerful oratorical skill. To demonstrate their worth, these speakers charged a fee from their audience. Earlier, Paul had used the image of a marketplace peddler (2 Cor. 2:17) to describe these hucksters. Paul would have nothing to do with their secret and shameful ways, or their deception or distortion. Paul did what none of them were doing—he set forth the truth!

We might think that the Corinthians would have welcomed Paul's integrity, but, in fact, they found his straightforward style less than impressive. Some might have implied that the reason more people weren't receiving the gospel was Paul's ineffective style. This explains several of Paul's points in today's passage.

First, Paul's ministry was solely rooted in God's mercy, which kept him from being discouraged by either suffering or criticism. Second, he could rightly commend himself to the Corinthians because he had nothing to hide. Third, resistance to the gospel was not due to weakness on Paul's part, but because "the god of this age" blinded people to God's truth. Calling Satan a "god" in no way suggests that Satan is like God, but only that he has certain dominion, limited authority, and the power to deceive. Finally, Paul didn't preach himself, but Christ. Unlike his opponents who drew people to their powerful personalities, Paul presented himself as a servant.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Before we're too hard on the Corinthians, we should ask ourselves if we're much different. It's easy to think that effective evangelism can happen only if our church has the latest multimedia equipment, a large gymnasium, and programs that appeal to nearly everyone. We want a popular pastor with relevant sermons and an outgoing personality. In the midst of it all, we lose sight of the fact that people need Jesus, not the perfect church. It's Satan who blinds people to the gospel, not a less than dynamic pastor.

2 Corinthians 4:2-7

In 2009, a Pakistani man named Kishan met a Christian woman, Mashir, who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him and prayed

for months for the healing of his daughter. God miraculously healed his child, and Kishan embraced faith in Christ. When confronted by neighbors upset about his conversion, Kishan testified: "We were in the dark, but now we are in the light because Jesus Christ is our Savior who healed my daughter. We found a new life in Jesus Christ, we cannot deny Him, and we are ready to sacrifice anything." His testimony so impressed one neighbor, Bashir, that he and his family have also committed their lives to Christ.

Our passage today emphasizes the ways that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings us into the light of the knowledge of God. This text reminds us that the starting point for growing in knowledge is the person and work of Jesus.

We saw yesterday that Paul countered the Corinthians' appeal to fancy rhetoric and worldly wisdom. He continued that emphasis in this letter. His proclamation of truth was not couched in complicated arguments or rhetorical flourish (v. 2). If the truth of the gospel was unclear, it was on account of the deception of the Evil One (v. 3).

Notice the way that Paul used the image of light. God is the originator of light (Gen. 1:3; 1 John 1:5). This refers not only to physical light but also to spiritual light—He "made his light shine in our hearts" (v. 6). This spiritual light is the glory of God. And the glory of God is fully embodied in Christ, who as the fully divine Son of God sacrificed Himself for our sin and was resurrected into glory (vv. 4, 6).

The gospel of Jesus Christ, then, opens our eyes to the light of God's glory—His love and justice and mercy. We cannot grow in the knowledge of God without embracing the truth about Jesus. This is a "treasure" that transforms our lives and enables us to know the power of God (v. 7).

Apply the Word

This text and the example of Mashir provide us with a good model of sharing the gospel with unbelievers. First, speak the truth plainly. Trust in the power of God, not our own arguments or rhetorical flourish, to remove the veil of unbelief. Second, pray for and minister to the needs of your unbelieving loved ones. The powerful witness of our love in action can prepare their hearts to receive the gospel and accept Jesus as their Savior.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. - 2 Corinthians 4:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

A king once became so discontent that he couldn't sleep. When he asked his counselors what he should do, one wise old man told the king, 'Find a man in your kingdom who is content, then wear his shirt for a day and a night, and you will be content.'

The king sent servants to search for such a person. When they returned, he asked, 'Did you find a contented man?'

'Yes, sire,' was the reply.

'Where is his shirt?'

'Your Majesty, he wasn't wearing one.'

The person in this make-believe story found contentment that transcended circumstances. Our troubles look like a very big deal when we focus on our immediate situations. But when we begin to see 'the eternal glory that far outweighs' any trial God asks us to endure, we gain a whole new outlook. Heavy burdens become 'light and momentary.'

Anyone who has read the book of Acts (our study for January 2000), or Paul's letters, knows he wasn't writing from an ivory tower. 2 Corinthians details the pain and heartache Paul suffered as he served Christ, but he didn't allow his emotions to erode his theology.

Paul could feel that his body was wasting away growing older and accumulating more and more scars along the way. Most of us can relate to that fact of life. But spiritually, the apostle was getting younger and stronger every day. And that's what kept him going.

Paul had a solid reason for his hope. What kept him from losing heart was the same hope we have today the resurrection of Jesus Christ (v. 14). Because God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, we can be sure God will also raise us up to be with Him forever.

The year 2000 is getting close but so what? Paul would tell us, 'If you're keeping a worried eye on the calendar, your focus is in the wrong place.' The unseen realities of the faith were more real for Paul than the things around him he could see. Remember, faith is being 'certain of what we do not see' (Heb. 11:1).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What happens when we 'fix our eyes' on eternal things (2 Cor. 4:18)?

For one thing, we learn the secret Moses learned as he persisted in doing God's will even when the most powerful king in the world, the Pharaoh of Egypt, opposed him. The writer of Hebrews said Moses 'persevered because he saw him who is invisible' (Heb. 11:27). Do you want an eternal perspective today? Spend some time in the Lord's presence fixing your attention on Him.

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Earlier this month we mentioned G.K. Chesterton, the great British writer and defender of the faith. In 1908, Chesterton wrote that Christian truth is a "thrilling romance." He went on to say: "People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There was never anything so perilous and so exciting as orthodoxy."

The apostle Paul would no doubt have said "Amen!" to Chesterton's sentiments. Paul was consumed by love for the truth of God. He gave his life to proclaiming and defending it, and in today's text he commends truth as a potent weapon against Satan's deception. We can't improve on that!

Any military commander can tell you about the difficulty of conducting a war when you're not getting accurate information. That's why armies work as hard on confusing and deceiving their enemies as they do on defeating them in battle.

Satan is in his element when it comes to deception. We know that Jesus called him the "father of lies" (John 8:44). He is the "god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4), blinding anyone he can to the truth, spreading his lies.

The primary targets of Satan's deception are unbelievers. But Jesus also warns us that in the end times, Satan's false prophets and false Christs will seek to deceive even the people of God (Matt. 24:24).

If deception is one of Satan's chief weapons in spiritual warfare, the best way to counter his efforts is by living in the light of the knowledge of God revealed in Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). The great thing about the truth is that when we live by it, we have nothing to hide or fear. Paul renounced "secret and shameful ways" (v. 2) because they are incompatible with the truth.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus tells us in today's verse that His truth has a sanctifying effect on us.

Sanctification is our growth in the faith, the goal being spiritual maturity and Christlikeness. But true spiritual growth demands that we submit every part of our lives to the searching light of the Word.

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

God ... made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. - 2 Corinthians 4:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Several years ago, fishing in the Mississippi River near Alton, Illinois, Tim Pruitt landed a 124-pound blue catfish. It took Pruitt more than half an hour to land the giant fish, which measured 58 inches long and 44 inches around. About as large as a sixth-grader, it broke the world record by two-and-a-half pounds and the state record by nearly twenty pounds. The huge catfish was kept alive, put on display at a Cabela's Outfitter store in Kansas City, and later returned to the river.

Jesus said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19). As we also see in today's reading, God is glorified when we share the light of the gospel with those living in darkness. When Paul wrote, "we have this ministry," he meant all believers (v. 1; see 3:18) and the new covenant (see 3:6). That means we are all responsible for spreading the good news.

The basis for our calling is not our own abilities or effectiveness but God's mercy. Our evangelistic "method" is simple—"setting forth the truth plainly" (v. 2). We do not need deceptions, distortions, or marketing tricks.

In fact, we cannot "convert" anyone. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, with the ultimate choice between the individual and God. Because unbelievers are spiritually blind, the gospel is veiled or concealed from their understanding (vv. 3-4). In addition, Satan takes an active role in further blinding their hearts and minds to the "light of the gospel of the glory of Christ."

God's hand is needed for any evangelism to be successful. This is why our goal in witnessing can only be to "commend ourselves to every man's conscience" (v. 2). Therefore, while we're passionate about sharing the good news, we need not fret about unbelievers' unresponsiveness. It's not about us (v. 5). God is the source of spiritual light and power in our witness, and He is the One who gives life (v. 6).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you caught any fish lately? Have you been baiting your hook well? Do the fish even know you're there? These questions aren't really about fishing, of course, but about evangelism. While God is the only One who can awaken belief in spiritually dead hearts, we have been commanded to be part of this process by sharing the gospel (Matt. 28:19-20). God is pleased to use us as His children to tell others of the good news of salvation in Christ. What a privilege!

2 Corinthians 4:6-12

A light from heaven flashed around him. - Acts 9:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 2006, Americans spent nearly \$11 billion on bottled water, consuming about 24 gallons of bottled water per person. Although most people agree that water is precious—especially on a hot summer day—few think twice about the plastic container that holds its refreshing contents. In the ancient world, clay water pots were looked at in much the same way. When one of these inexpensive containers broke, it was thrown away with scarcely a second thought. Paul used the powerful imagery of these expendable vessels to contrast human frailty with God's amazing indwelling power.

No doubt Paul had his own experience on the road to Damascus in mind when he wrote verse 6. Whereas Satan blinds, God shines forth the light that brings knowledge of Him. Drawing from Genesis 1:3, Paul likened God's power to bring forth light at creation to God's power to illumine a human soul and bring forth eternal life through the gospel. At creation, humans were made in the image of God, but in redemption, believers are remade into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

Recall from yesterday's study that Paul had to defend his ministry against critics in Corinth. They considered Paul's experiences of being given over to death as discrediting his apostolic authority. Paul countered that in contrast to the human power that the Corinthians highly prized, what mattered was God's power in human weakness. Paul's apostolic calling meant a life of suffering so that Jesus' resurrection life might be revealed through him.

Paul previously presented himself as a defeated slave who had been God's former enemy (see Nov. 7). Here he presented himself as a worthless container. These images offered a compelling picture of Paul's humility in contrast to the Corinthians' arrogance. The image of a clay jar also showed that Paul was expendable. It wasn't the container that counted, it was the contents—the power of God working through the gospel—that truly mattered.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever thought that you weren't qualified to serve in a particular ministry because you weren't smart enough? Or maybe you think that you aren't outgoing enough, or that you're too old ... or too young. What an encouragement to realize that the Lord isn't looking for these qualifications. Our frailties and fears are no obstacle for the all-powerful God. He delights in using clay pots, chipped and cracked, so that His "all-surpassing power" might be displayed in our human weakness.

2 Corinthians 4:6-12

A light from heaven flashed around him. - Acts 9:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 2006, Americans spent nearly \$11 billion on bottled water, consuming about 24 gallons of bottled water per person. Although most people agree that water is precious—especially on a hot summer day—few think twice about the plastic container that holds its refreshing contents. In the ancient world, clay water pots were looked at in much the same way. When one of these inexpensive containers broke, it was thrown away with scarcely a second thought. Paul used the powerful imagery of these expendable vessels to contrast human frailty with God's amazing indwelling power.

No doubt Paul had his own experience on the road to Damascus in mind when he wrote verse 6. Whereas Satan blinds, God shines forth the light that brings knowledge of Him. Drawing from Genesis 1:3, Paul likened God's power to bring forth light at creation to God's power to illumine a human soul and bring forth eternal life through the gospel. At creation, humans were made in the image of God, but in redemption, believers are remade into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

Recall from yesterday's study that Paul had to defend his ministry against critics in Corinth. They considered Paul's experiences of being given over to death as discrediting his apostolic authority. Paul countered that in contrast to the human power that the Corinthians highly prized, what mattered was God's power in human weakness. Paul's apostolic calling meant a life of suffering so that Jesus' resurrection life might be revealed through him.

Paul previously presented himself as a defeated slave who had been God's former enemy (see Nov. 7). Here he presented himself as a worthless container. These images offered a compelling picture of Paul's humility in contrast to the Corinthians' arrogance. The image of a clay jar also showed that Paul was expendable. It wasn't the container that counted, it was the contents—the power of God working through the gospel—that truly mattered.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever thought that you weren't qualified to serve in a particular ministry because you weren't smart enough? Or maybe you think that you aren't outgoing enough, or that you're too old ... or too young. What an encouragement to realize that the Lord isn't looking for these qualifications. Our frailties and fears are no obstacle for the all-powerful God. He delights in using clay pots, chipped and cracked, so that His "all-surpassing power" might be displayed in our human weakness.

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

Now faith is being ... certain of what we do not see. - Hebrews 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 2003, Americans received 2.8 million injections of Botox, at an average cost of \$399 per injection. Nearly 8.7 million had some type of cosmetic procedure, spending total of \$9.4 billion. A full face lift costs on average \$6,542. Half of all cosmetic procedures were performed on people between the ages of 35 and 50. Although women have been the primary consumers of such surgeries, an increasing number of men are seeking minimally invasive procedures to help make them look younger. It's no secret—many people are obsessed with looking younger.

Today's passage offers a compelling challenge to this fixation on youth. Paul contemplated decay and death from a much different perspective. The passage begins with a quote from Psalm 116:10. The psalmist praises God for delivering him from a near-death experience. Filled with praise, he proclaims the Lord's goodness. Paul links his own proclamation of the gospel, even in the face of persecution, with his faith in God's resurrection power.

Once again Paul reminded the Corinthians that his own adverse circumstances were for their own benefit. Because of Paul's suffering for the gospel, the grace of God was being manifest to many people, resulting in gratitude and glory to God.

Focusing on God's greater purposes gave Paul an eternal perspective. The second half of today's passage links the "outwardly" with our mortal experience in this present age, where we experience the ongoing effects of the Fall.

The "inwardly," however, is linked with Christ's work in us, through which we're being prepared for life in heaven. (This contrast will also be our focus in tomorrow's passage.) The experience of being "hard pressed" (see 2 Cor. 4:8) doesn't actually crush us, but prepares us to receive future glory. The "weight," or substance, of this glory makes earthly pressures seem light and momentary. To understand that the painful pressures of life are temporary is truly to have an eternal perspective.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Fear of death is a natural human emotion. But this fear is unbearable without the eternal perspective that today's passage offers. It's not that the decaying process of the "outer" person isn't painful and distressing. It's not that trials in this life aren't anguishing. It's just that life on this earth isn't all there is ... and what's to come is beyond all we can imagine. Are you fearful of aging and dying? Ask the Spirit to help you see these fears from the perspective of eternal glory with Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. - 2 Corinthians 4:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

In Future Grace, John Piper wrote: "[T]he greatest grace in world history is now past. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come into the world. In a sense we could say that God's grace has come in person and done such a decisive work of grace that all other experiences of grace depend on it ... He came for the sake of future grace. From the time of Christ onwards, every look back should include a look to Jesus. Without him there would be no future grace."

We live our spiritual lives within the abundant grace of which Piper spoke. God's grace in our lives is best shown, in a humbling way, through our weaknesses, for it is through our weaknesses that God is glorified.

This point sounds counterintuitive. Wouldn't God be more glorified by our accomplishments and achievements, by giving us the

ability to do great things for Him? Perhaps, if power were the only issue at stake. But God is so much more than all-powerful—He's also all-loving, all-wise, perfectly faithful, and more. So when we are weak, He continues to use us to fulfill His purposes and proves all of these things. One would think the King could afford to use vessels made exclusively of gold and silver, but it is to His greater glory to work with “jars of clay” filled with the “treasure” of the gospel (v. 7).

For a clay pot to contain the truth and power of redemption, it means that we carry Christ's death in our own bodies, in the sense that we, too, experience trials and troubles (vv. 8-12). Just as death was not the end for Him, so also are we hard pressed but not crushed, struck down but not destroyed. Jesus' death preceded the victory of the Resurrection, and in the same way our present sufferings reveal the life of Jesus. This is the foundation for sharing the gospel (vv. 13-15).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The divine irony that God is glorified in our weakness reminds us that an eternal perspective transcends all. Eternal or spiritual things are far more important and valuable than temporal or earthly things. As an old song says, “Only one life, t'will soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last.” Thus, we are encouraged to choose the things of God: “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (v. 17).

2 Corinthians 5

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Death has been swallowed up in victory. - 1 Corinthians 15:54

TODAY IN THE WORD

For the past four years, TV viewers have watched Ty Pennington and his design team transform run-down dumps into dream homes. Each Sunday, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* features a family chosen for a home renovation. The next hour chronicles a suspenseful race against the clock as walls are moved, exteriors are redone, and yards are landscaped within the given week. At the show's end, the family returns to its new home, hidden from sight by the large “Extreme Makeover” bus. Then the design team, volunteers, neighbors, and the family all cry out, “Move that bus!” At last, the family sees its new home for the first time.

Sometimes it's nearly impossible to imagine how Pennington and his team will make something desirable out of the dilapidated challenge they're facing! Similarly, it can be hard to imagine the eternal house in heaven that God has for us. In today's passage, the contrast between our mortal, “outer” and our eternal, “inner” existence is further developed. Here we have the contrast between earthly and heavenly. Paul used the common ancient metaphor of a house to speak of human bodies to assure the Corinthians—and us—that, at death, our earthly bodies are clothed with our resurrection bodies. The normal human fear of dying is reflected in Paul's statement that “we do not wish to be unclothed” (v. 4). And yet, we groan, or sigh, for our heavenly dwelling. This idea was also expressed by the writer of Ecclesiastes, when he said that God has put eternity in human hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Just like a monetary down payment on a home, God gives us the Spirit as a deposit, making absolutely certain the reality of our resurrection bodies.

If we're in our earthly bodies, then we are not “at home” with the Lord, which is where we long to be. Although the difference between earth and heaven is more than we can imagine, one thing remains the same: our desire to please the Lord.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Romans 8:1 makes it clear that faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ on the cross clears us from condemnation. So the judgment in today's passage is about evaluation, not condemnation. The idea of accounting for our lives isn't popular these days. Yet what we do now with our bodies matters. On the other hand, obedience doesn't earn our salvation. Obedience and good works show our trust and delight in God. As John Piper writes, “Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God.”

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

We groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. - 2 Corinthians 5:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

A recent Christian book promised readers that they could discover their personal strengths and abilities in order to attain health, abundance, significance, and success. It was an appealing offer, and the book became a bestseller. The message was perfectly targeted for American Christians: You can have more and better stuff, and you can have it all right now!

Our passage today poses an interesting challenge for believers. The apostle Paul talks about groaning for heaven, longing to be with the Lord. We may secretly think, Of course Paul felt that way—he was a “super-Christian.” We can't be expected to think like

that, can we?

No matter what our life is like now, our longing for heaven should not be diminished. Notice that Paul does not describe his desire for heaven just because his life on earth is hard. It's true that he experienced tremendous persecution, but he says that our separation from our final heavenly existence means that we are in some way incomplete right now (v. 4). The reason for this is found in verse 5: "God has made us for this very purpose." He has created us with the intention that we will live with Him for eternity in the new heaven and new earth. He has shaped us for the purpose of eternal worship and fellowship with Him.

Our lives on earth are important, but ultimately our true life will be found only in heaven, apart from anything we accomplish or accumulate on this earth.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives should remind us of the fullness of experiencing God in eternity. He is the deposit that guarantees the full reward. He is the evidence that God is preparing us for something far greater.

The response, then, of longing to be with God is not somehow for "super-Christians." Additionally, we desire to please Him, knowing that we will be held accountable for the way that we live, the values that we hold, and the things we desire on this earth (vv. 9-10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In his Christianity Today article, "Come Lord Jesus—But Not Too Soon," John Koessler confesses that he knows he should long for Jesus' return ... but he still wanted to experience more of life on earth.

2 Corinthians 5:5 Ephesians 1:3-14; Colossians 1:9-23

Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. - 2 Corinthians 5:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

In both Britain and the United States, it's customary for a man to give an engagement ring when he asks a woman to marry him. This tradition probably dates back to the Greeks or perhaps even the Egyptians. The first diamond engagement ring was apparently given in Austria in 1477. Thus the engagement ring is an enduring token of a couple's commitment to marry each other and spend their lives together.

The Bible also talks about a "token" and a marriage. The Bridegroom is the Lord Jesus Christ, and we, His church, are the bride. As His bride, we have received something more glorious than a ring, because we've been given God's pledge, His Holy Spirit, as a token of His promise to be with us forever.

In both Ephesians and 2 Corinthians Paul describes the Holy Spirit as a deposit, who guarantees our eternal inheritance. Although the imagery is different, the same truth is expressed whether we think of the Holy Spirit as type of engagement ring or down payment. In both cases, God's indwelling Spirit assures us that we'll be in His presence for all eternity.

The opening part of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church underscores God's glorious work on our behalf through the work of Christ. These verses span God's work of election before the world's foundation to our present redemption and adoption as God's own children to the eternal inheritance that awaits us. This sweep from past to future assures us of God's complete control over the entire scope of our lives.

Our greatest assurance of our future glory, however, is our marking, or sealing, with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13). In Paul's day as well as our own, cattle were often marked, or branded, with their owner's seal to protect against theft. In a similar way, Paul says that believers have been "sealed" as God's special possession with His own seal, His Holy Spirit.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Engagement rings, down payments, and cattle brands are all helpful pictures of commitment, guarantee, and protection, but none of them can truly capture the depth of God's commitment to us through His indwelling Holy Spirit. Later in Ephesians, we read that we've been sealed until the day of redemption, or Christ's return (Eph. 4:30). What assurance this gives us when we face trials or doubts. We are God's possession, with His own Spirit to vouch for it.

2 Corinthians 5:6-15

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. - 2 Corinthians 5:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Stott died on July 27, 2011. He was known as one of Evangelicalism's leading voices as a prolific writer, expositor of the Scriptures, and framer of the historic Lausanne Covenant. At the announcement of his death, Billy Graham issued this statement: "The evangelical world has lost one of its greatest spokesmen, and I have lost one of my close personal friends and advisors. I look forward to seeing him again when I go to Heaven."

The secret to living a life like John Stott's, a life of passionate commitment to people and ministry and the gospel, is found in the passage we read today from 2 Corinthians. This text frames reality for those of us who follow Christ. There are two dimensions to life: the seen and the unseen, the temporal and the eternal. Those without the Spirit of Christ order their lives according to the first dimension, denying the existence of the second. Without an eternal perspective, there is not much to live for beyond one's own ambitions and pleasures. But the Christian is compelled by the second dimension—the unseen. For the Christian, time is marching forward to a climactic point: the judgment seat of Christ. That moment in the eternal dimension gives meaning and purpose to every moment of the temporal dimension.

Christ is the invisible eyewitness to every moment of every day. We will give Him an account for everything we do, say, or think. To live in this reality is to have urgency about life, to know what is ultimate, and to speak courageously about these realities to those around us. We are compelled and moved forward by the sheer delight of knowing God's great love for us and for humanity.

Walking in the fear of the Lord motivates us to share our faith with the world. It shapes our priorities, drives our ambitions, and fuels our passions.

APPLY THE WORD

We're often afraid to share our faith for fear that we might lose relationships. But what gives us courage in evangelism is rooting ourselves more and more securely in the realities of heaven. Pray the words John Stott prayed every morning: "Father I pray that I may live this day in Your presence and please You more and more. Lord Jesus I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow You. Holy Spirit, I pray that this day You will ... cause Your fruit to ripen in my life."

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2; Colossians 1:3-8 2 Corinthians 5:20

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. - 2 Corinthians 5:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

In the ancient world, ambassadors were extremely important representatives of their countries. A visit from a foreign ambassador was the occasion of much pomp and celebration. In order to show other world powers that their king or queen was a serious player, these ambassadors often had access to great wealth and power themselves and could easily resort to bribery or intimidation to secure their demands. In this context, it's somewhat surprising that Paul would call believers ambassadors. But as we'll see, it's a very high calling.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he had to defend himself against those who rejected both him and the gospel message. Apparently there were even those in Corinth who sought to gain financially from sharing the gospel (2 Cor. 2:17). So Paul made it clear that there were no gimmicks with him; the nature of who he was and of his ministry were plain for all to see. Paul's sincerity clearly set him apart from any who would abuse a position of power for personal or financial gain. Unlike others, he was motivated by the fear of the Lord (v. 11).

More importantly, however, Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that the only basis for their identity was Jesus Christ. It didn't matter who they knew or what they had formerly done, the only thing that mattered was that they were a new creation in Christ! What was important from the world's perspective lost its significance in comparison with Christ (v. 16).

Once again we find the important theme of reconciliation here. Recall from our study yesterday that this reconciliation is both between a person and God as well as between a person and other people. In today's passage this idea is extended further: in addition to being reconciled, we are called to a ministry of reconciliation.

Paul models this ministry for us in the rest of this passage. His strong tone reveals how deeply he cared for the Corinthians and was anxious for their salvation. Like an ambassador who seeks to avoid a crisis, Paul pleaded with the Corinthians to be reconciled with God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever thought of yourself as an ambassador? Take some time today to list the qualities and responsibilities of a good ambassador. For example, an ambassador must be comfortable in another culture and sensitive to how things are said, qualities that are also important for sharing Christ, especially in a cross-cultural context.

Ambassadors must often be patient, yet persistent. Above all, ambassadors act on behalf of the one who sent them, not according to their own interests. Truly, being an ambassador for Christ is a high calling.

2 Corinthians 5:11-15

Christ's love compels us. - 2 Corinthians 5:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1996, pollster George Barna published an influential study about American religious beliefs. According to his polls, 85 percent of Americans consider themselves Christians. Nearly nine out of ten people believe that God judges individuals for their deeds. A surprising 56 percent of respondents claim that being "generally good" or doing "enough good things" enables a person to go to heaven. Only 39 percent believe that those who reject Jesus Christ are damned.

Today's passage offers a very different view from what passes for much of American Christianity. Yesterday we considered the judgment that evaluates believers' actions. Paul may have had this in mind when he spoke of the fear of the Lord (v. 11), indicating part of his motivation for evangelism. The final judgment of all people also drove Paul to persuade people concerning the truth of Jesus Christ. The word persuade was probably deliberately chosen to show the contrast between Paul and those in Corinth who resorted to polished rhetoric and who took pride in outward appearances (v. 12).

Paul again urged the Corinthians to recognize the integrity of his preaching and lifestyle. This was no popularity contest. To take pride in Paul was to take pride in Christ. To reject Paul, or to be ashamed of him, was to trust in something deceptive, and ultimately destructive. The reference to being out of his mind could be taken in one of two ways. First, Paul's opponents may have had ecstatic experiences that they claimed as validation for their ministries. The Corinthians may have wanted to see this in Paul. The Apostle argued that such experiences were between him and God. Alternatively, some may have said that Paul was psychologically imbalanced.

If fear of judgment was one motivation for Paul, the greater driving force was the love of Christ. For Paul, this meant the love that Christ demonstrated by dying on the cross. It's that love, and the resurrection that it made possible, that compelled Paul in all that he did.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

According to the Barna report, many people believe that good people go to heaven, with or without Jesus Christ. Some claim that 2 Corinthians 5:15 supports the idea that Christ died for everyone, so everyone will go to heaven. But in keeping with the rest of the Bible, this verse indicates that Christ died the death that all should have died and will have to die apart from saving faith in Him. The rest of this verse makes it clear that life is only possible through Christ's resurrection.

2 Corinthians 5:14

No Angle

In response to a reporter's question, a missionary talked about the hardships of his work as a physician in a distant land. Probing, the reporter asked, "Why would an educated man like you dedicate his life to a work like that?" The missionary replied, "Because a man who loves God comes to love the people God has sent him to help." The skeptical reporter continued, "but what other reasons do you have?" "None that I'm aware of." Later the reporter said, "I still don't know what makes a man like that tick. Everybody has to have an angle."

2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. - Matthew 5:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

We have spent the last few days considering what God's justice and mercy look like in terms of caring for the vulnerable and extending generosity, specifically among our needy brothers and sisters. Now we turn our attention for the remainder of the month to God's justice and mercy as seen through pictures of reconciliation and new creation in the New Testament.

Paul asserts that Christ's love drives and controls gospel ministry (vv. 11-14). Christ's love compels because of the certainty of the transforming power of His death and resurrection. "Us" and "we" occur 14 times in our reading for today. For today's readers, these pronouns refer to all who put their faith in Jesus' death and resurrection and so "no longer live for themselves but for Him" (v. 15).

Jesus' death and resurrection transforms us. Now we are reconciled to God (v. 18); now we enter His new creation (v. 17); now we

see with spiritual eyes (v. 16); and now we are Christ's ambassadors, entrusted with the ministry and message of reconciliation (vv. 18-19). How did this transformation happen? While humanity was alienated and estranged from God—as His enemies—God initiated forgiveness that completely restored our relationship with Him. This is called "reconciliation," and it's made possible because our sin was dealt with once for all on the cross (vv. 18-19, 21; cf. Rom. 5:10).

Reconciliation as a noun or verb appears 5 times (vv. 18-20), indicating that it is the central theme. As one New Testament scholar puts it, reconciliation is God's "cosmic restoration" project to make new all that is chaotic and distorted in the world, beginning with His relationship with humanity. God is the first Reconciler. As with His justice, righteousness, and love, we are also called to bear His image as reconcilers. Reconciliation is more than a message; it is a ministry. It is the work of forgiveness and peacemaking and of healing broken relationships, beginning with our relationship with God and extending throughout the whole world. Reconciliation is the pathway to new creation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The picture of new creation is astonishing: "The old has gone, the new has come" (v. 16). This is God's mission in the world through Christ—making all things new. As Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice put it, reconciliation, justice, and new creation are not things we strive toward, but gifts of God that we accept. To delve deeper into today's passage and the message and ministry of reconciliation, work through Katongole and Rice's book *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace, and Healing*.

2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2

I am doing a new thing! - Isaiah 43:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Jim Strietelmeier, a graduate from Moody Bible Institute along with his wife Debbie, leads an amazing church in East Indianapolis. Their church-based mission, Neighborhood Fellowship, includes a Christian school, foster care for emotionally disturbed children, and employment opportunities in two associated businesses. Their diverse church is about 60 percent Caucasian and 40 percent African American. This remarkable work stems from Jim's thoroughly biblical view of ministry: "We aren't ministering to the poor. We are the poor. There's no distinction between our church and our community." Jim and Debbie are true ministers of reconciliation, exemplifying many of the principles in today's passage.

Prior to his conversion, Paul viewed Jesus as a blasphemer who had been justly executed (v. 16). His encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus revealed to Paul the reality of Jesus Christ and exposed his own deeply rooted sin. This encounter with Jesus Christ brought forth a new work in Paul, and indeed in anyone who is in Christ. Believers are new creations, bearing His image, not that of fallen humanity. This new work brings about a new perspective—one that regards others not by external standards, but by the indwelling Christ.

Viewing others as new creations in Christ is evidence of the greater work of reconciliation that God is effecting through Jesus Christ in the world. Because the greatest division of all is the rift between God and fallen human beings, God made the sinless Jesus to be sin so that His own righteousness might be satisfied. The greatest need of any human is first and foremost to be reconciled with God through Christ.

Because the Corinthians' rejection of Paul reflected alienation from God, Paul urged them to be reconciled. Quoting from Isaiah 49:8, Paul showed that God had now done something even greater than bringing the people back from exile in Babylon. Through Christ, the day of salvation from the bondage of sin had arrived. His urgent appeal revealed once again his deep love for the Corinthian church.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

True reconciliation begins with God and is only possible through Christ. Our part involves repenting and receiving His grace. Once reconciled with God, we have a responsibility to live as ministers of reconciliation. As scholar David Garland writes, "Like Christ, a minister of reconciliation plunges into the midst of human tumult to bring harmony out of chaos, reconciliation out of estrangement, and love in the place of hate." We may need to repair broken relationships or renounce sinful attitudes toward others.

2 Corinthians 5:17 Revelation 21:1-22:5

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! - 2 Corinthians 5:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

New Year's Eve is traditionally the time when people make resolutions. With the new year lying before them, many determine to make fundamental changes in their lives. Most resolutions go unfulfilled. After six weeks fewer than half of those people who made

resolutions still keep them.

What we really need is not a set of new resolutions but a new world. This is exactly what we find in today's passage. A new heaven and new earth replace the old. Instead of old Jerusalem there is the new Jerusalem, "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). The fellowship that humanity lost in the garden will be restored. Indeed, the fellowship with God that we will enjoy in this new city will be superior to what Adam and Eve experienced in the Garden of Eden.

In the new Jerusalem, fellowship with God will be permanent rather than intermittent. God will dwell with us there (v. 3). His presence will be so immediate that no temple will be needed. No external source of light will be necessary either, "for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp" (Rev. 21:23).

A river flows through the city emanating from God's throne. This is no ordinary river but a river of the water of life. The tree of life is also there. The tree of life will bear fruit year round and its leaves will be used "for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). The servant kings who dwell in the city will see God's face (Rev. 22:4).

Although we do not yet see that city we already have a foretaste of the new life that will characterize it. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). His resurrection power and the abiding presence of His Holy Spirit can enable us to live out the godly resolutions we make for the coming year.

APPLY THE WORD

It's good to make resolutions, as long as you rely upon the Holy Spirit to keep them. You can read the list of resolutions Jonathan Edwards made when he was a young man at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/the-resolutions-of-jonathan-edwards>. Why not finish the year by making your own list? First spend time in prayer, asking the Lord to reveal to you anything you need to eliminate or any habits you should adopt. Submit this to Him in joy.

2 Corinthians 5:17 Acts 3:1-10

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! - 2 Corinthians 5:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Lulu Cecilia Fleming was born in Florida in 1862, the daughter of a slave who died at the close of the Civil War. This remarkable woman received training in theology and became the first black person commissioned for career missionary service by the Woman's American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society. Miss Fleming's first term of service was in the Congo, after which she came home and completed medical school. She returned to the Congo as a medical missionary, but contracted African sleeping sickness and died in 1899.

Dr. Fleming did not have much in the way of "silver or gold" to give the people God called her to serve. But what she had, she gave freely. She gave of her love for Christ and of her abilities as a teacher and physician. Ultimately, Dr. Fleming gave her life in service to the Lord.

The same could be said of many of God's servants. Though Peter and John did not have what the crippled man at the temple gate was looking for, they certainly had what he needed.

It's interesting that while this man's healing was recorded, his salvation is not specifically mentioned. But the events that follow make it obvious that this hungry beggar received the Bread of Life when he encountered the two apostles that day.

This story, and a number of incidents in the Gospels, illustrate a fact we mentioned at the beginning of the month. A passion for souls involves caring about the whole person, body and spirit. Combining evangelism with care for human needs has been a successful ministry formula for many centuries.

Some people in church history have focused on the physical and social side of ministry, to the neglect of people's eternal needs. But the pattern for us is established in Scripture. Peter and John did not simply heal this man and leave him in his sins. He became another witness to Israel of God's saving grace in Christ (see Acts 3:11-26).

Jesus also cared for the whole person. He said to a sinful woman, "Your faith has saved you" (Luke 7:50), and to a suffering woman, "Your faith has healed you" (Luke 8:48). Interestingly, "saved" and "healed" are the same word in the original language.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When we are passionate about souls, we will view people the way Jesus saw them, as whole persons with physical, material, and spiritual needs.

There are probably people in your community, or in your own church, who have needs you can help meet. Maybe you can help them through a family project, or through your Sunday school class or prayer group. Your church leaders are a good resource for this type of information. Why not ask about the possibilities this weekend?

2 Corinthians 5:18 Acts 10:24-48; 11:15-18

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. - 2 Corinthians 5:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Since television shows have started making entire seasons available on DVD, some people have sat down intending to watch just one episode—only to find themselves hooked to find out what happens next with the characters and plot lines. Hours later, they're still eagerly watching one episode after another.

Acts is better than that show “you just can't miss,” and yesterday's reading left us in suspense. In the middle of the story of Peter and Cornelius, we were left wondering if Peter will fully obey God's command not to discriminate against Gentiles. Will God's reconciliation be worked out, or will these two groups remain separate and alienated from one another? Today we'll discover the outcome.

“The next day,” Peter took his first big steps toward reconciliation: he traveled to Cornelius' house and entered into Gentile space. God had transformed Peter's prior understanding; Peter declared it himself (v. 28). The good news is that through Jesus, God reconciles all people to Himself, Jews and Gentiles (v. 35). This is why Peter calls Jesus “Lord of all” (v. 36). Peter's conversion of understanding occurs, and then Cornelius' conversion to faith.

While Peter continued to tell about Jesus, he was interrupted by the Holy Spirit. Echoes of Pentecost resound, but this time, to the astonishment of Peter and his companions, the Spirit anointed Gentiles, who began “speaking in tongues and praising God” (vv. 44-46). If the message wasn't clear before, the Holy Spirit certainly sealed the deal: God “accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (v. 35; 11:17).

He is not God of one people group, but God of the whole world. Therefore, all who trust in Jesus Christ are members of one family, brothers and sisters despite all diversity and difference and barriers of hostility the world erects. Peter and Cornelius represent all Jews and Gentiles respectively. Reconciled first to God, now they must be reconciled with one another.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Immediately after his visit to Cornelius' house, Peter traveled to Jerusalem where he recounted the entire episode to the Jewish Christians there (Acts 11:1-18). The story of reconciliation and the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit is so astonishing that Luke records it twice. It is important for us to hear and tell stories of reconciliation. They remind us of the truth, power, and hope of the gospel. If Maggy Barankitse can extend forgiveness and reconciliation, surely through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit we can, too.

2 Corinthians 5:21 Romans 3:21-26

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. - 2 Corinthians 5:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

Economists estimate that about 80 percent of all Americans carry a credit card debt. Most homeowners have a loan or mortgage, or even a second mortgage, to repay. Students must often borrow tens of thousands of dollars to attend increasingly expensive universities. Car loans are standard practice, and personal loans are available for those with good credit ratings. Many firms specialize in debt consolidation or refinancing, if payments soar out of a person's control. For others, a pawn shop or loan shark might be the only option for a loan.

What financial debts are you carrying right now? Imagine a mysterious stranger showing up on your doorstep to let you know he's paid off everything. How would you feel? Freedom, release, and joy, of course!

In the spiritual realm, Christ paid an even heavier debt, one which no human being could ever pay or repay. His atonement is a fulfillment of the Old Testament sin offering (Rom. 8:3). As today's verse illustrates, He became the “scapegoat” for our sins, taking our guilt and punishment upon Himself.

As the culmination of the Old Testament sacrifices, Christ substituted Himself for us. Our guilt was transferred to Him, and by faith

His righteousness is transferred to us (Rom. 3:22). The result is that we are no longer under a condemnation of death (Rom. 8:1).

The word “justified” (Rom. 3:24) indicates a legal transaction, a transfer of guilt similar to that seen in yesterday’s devotional. By this transaction, God’s justice is satisfied (v. 26). The NASB conveys this idea by translating “sacrifice of atonement” as “propitiation,” indicating a filling or a satisfaction (v. 25) of God’s wrath.

Redemption, however, is a matter not only of justice, but also of love. In this ultimate sacrifice, God Himself acted as the “priest,” offering His only Son for the salvation of the world (v. 25). From start to finish, Christ’s atoning sacrifice clearly demonstrates God’s infinite love (cf. 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Christ’s atonement should prompt in us abundant thankfulness and faith! As a “thank offering” to God for His gift of eternal life, consider one of these creative options:

- Compose a song about Christ’s redemptive sacrifice.
- Write a poem commemorating the deeper meaning of Easter Sunday.
- Draw or paint a picture of “eternal life.” Convey both meaning and feeling.

2 Corinthians 6

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

In 2003, the infamous “tech bubble” burst and flattened sectors of the American economy, particularly the stock value of technology companies. Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, canceled his stock options in the company in exchange for \$75 million. Since Apple’s share price had fallen from \$36 to \$7, it seemed like a good financial strategy. Had he held those options, however, today they would be worth over \$10 billion.

We might not encounter financial deals in the millions or billions of dollars, but spiritually we often have the same option: choose something that looks attractive now and forfeit valuable spiritual riches. Today we transition from our examination of extending grace to warnings about the grace offered to us. Growing in grace includes understanding what is at stake in the offer of God’s grace to us.

Our passage today warns us not to receive this grace in vain (v. 1). In order to see what that means, examine the context. In chapter 5, Paul had urged the Corinthian church to hear his message (5:11). He had many difficult matters to address with this church, and they were not inclined to hear the message of this apostle. He reminded them they shared the heritage of the gospel and the urgency of reconciliation that flowed from it (5:18–21).

By refusing to hear the admonition of Paul, the Corinthians were in danger of rejecting the grace offered to them. They were choosing comfort over conviction, rhetoric over repentance, and wealth over wisdom. They placed more value in immediate appearances than eternal priorities.

Paul described in detail how his message came from God and not his own ego: he was speaking “in truthful speech and in the power of God” with love for this church (v. 7). He was willing to suffer greatly in order to prod this church back to God’s grace (vv. 4–10). Their rejection of him wasn’t simply a bruise to his self-esteem. It was a refusal to accept the grace of God that would enable them to return to righteousness and be reconciled to the Lord, to Paul, and to each other.

Apply the Word

How will you respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit? Paul took great pains to demonstrate that he is not trying to manipulate or control the Corinthians. His plea came out of “the Holy Spirit and in sincere love” (v. 6). If a godly person in your life is making such a plea with you, accept the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation being offered to God. Thank the Holy Spirit for stirring your heart to address any sin, and don’t take the grace of conviction in vain.

2 Corinthians 6:6-13

Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in ... holiness and sincerity. - 2 Corinthians 1:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne once wrote, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness." Although only 30 when he died, his godly lifestyle impacted thousands. His Spirit-filled preaching helped to spark a revival that spread across Scotland to northern England in the 1840s.

McCheyne understood the link between personal integrity and effective ministry. Sadly, there are many examples of Christian leaders whose shady financial dealings or sexual improprieties have dishonored the name of Christ and the cause of the gospel.

Paul knew that his credibility in ministry depended upon his personal holiness. During his day, Cynics were philosophers known for their disrespectful antics. The name Cynic comes from the Greek word for "dog," which gives some hint as to their outrageous tactics. Unlike these frauds, Paul's conscience was clear regarding his own conduct. He could honestly say that he had endured unrelenting suffering and persecution with "truthful speech and in the power of God" (v. 7).

Despite his references to his own suffering, Paul never sought adverse circumstances nor glamorized his trials. All that he endured was for the sake of the gospel. His sufferings authenticated his apostolic calling. Also, these trials revealed a life fully yielded to the Spirit. Notice the stability of Paul's character, unwavering through glory and dishonor, through bad or good reports. Though often misunderstood, Paul didn't retaliate or compromise his integrity, but exhibited patience and kindness. Unlike others who resorted to trickery, Paul was armed with "weapons of righteousness."

Today's passage ends with Paul's most impassioned entreaty to the Corinthians. He had been completely honest and upright in all his dealings with them, but they were treating him otherwise. Appealing to them as a father, he urged them to respond as his very own children.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Personal holiness is perhaps the most essential requirement for ministry. Nothing discredits the gospel more quickly than hypocritical, unethical, or immoral actions. Paul's example presents us with two important responses. First, we need to pray for the protection and continued integrity of our pastors and other church leaders. Second, today's passage also challenges us to "put no stumbling blocks in anyone's path." In addition to guarding our own integrity, we can also cultivate the servant-like attitude that permeates today's passage.

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols. - 1 John 5:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

A recent study found that 56 percent of single Christian "fundamentalists" have had sexual relations outside of marriage. Many pastors and Christian leaders report that an increasing number of engaged couples have sex before their wedding. In his book *Postmodern Times*, Gene Edward Veith Jr. writes that surveys suggest that whereas Christians used to feel guilt and shame for indulging in improper sexual behavior, an increasing number of professing Christians don't appear to consider immorality to be a serious issue.

The failure of Christians to separate themselves from their surrounding culture has always been a serious problem. Although some apply today's passage only to the question of a Christian marrying a non-Christian, the larger focus concerns the problem of idolatry. No doubt Paul had taught about this numerous times during his stay in Corinth, but the Corinthians probably had a hard time grasping this because Greco-Roman culture included the worship of multiple gods and goddesses.

A yoke was designed to join two beasts of burden together. This is the image of Matthew 11:29-30, which teaches that we're to be yoked to Christ alone. How then did Paul apply this imagery to the Corinthians' interactions with nonbelievers? He certainly didn't advocate avoiding any contact with nonbelievers, as 1 Corinthians 5:9-10 makes clear. Paul was warning about alliances that compromised the Corinthians' walk with the Lord. Paul's reference to Satan as Belial, which comes from a Hebrew word meaning "ruin" or "wickedness," underscores the spiritual threat involved. The danger of spiritual impurity is also seen in the Old Testament quotations woven throughout this passage. Leviticus 26:12, Jeremiah 32:38, Ezekiel 37:27 (referenced in v. 16), and 2 Samuel 7:8, 14 (referenced in v. 18) all speak in some way of God's covenant promises to His people. The quotes from Isaiah 52:11 and Ezekiel 20:34, 41 stress Israel's need to separate itself from the idolatrous surrounding nations (see v. 17). Paul appealed to these powerful promises and warnings as compelling incentives to purity.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

All idols promise life, but they actually take away life by demanding more and more. Humans were made for worship, so if they're not worshiping the triune God, they're worshiping something else. Believers aren't immune to idolatry. In our media culture, many idols involve images from TV or movies that appear to promise life and significance. In our sexually obsessed society, idols often

involve sexual addiction or pornography. Whatever the idol promises, it can't deliver. God alone is the answer to our longings.

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

George Washington once said: ""Associate with men of good quality, if you esteem your reputation; for it is better to be alone than in bad company.""

This insight from our nation's first President is a mirror image of today's verse (1 Cor. 15:33; cf. Prov. 22:24-25). If we associate ourselves with ""bad company,"" our lives will reflect the negative influence they have on us. The opposite is also true: godly friends can have a positive influence on our character and actions.

In friendships as in other areas of life, our enemy's goal in spiritual warfare is to outwit us as believers (2 Cor. 2:11). In all our relationships, we need to be on guard against his schemes.

If we fail to be alert or discerning about people, we will be drawn into the wrong kind of relationships, with the destructive or sinful effects described in today's verse.

For example, we usually think of being ""unequally yoked"" (2 Cor. 6:14) as applying to marriage to unbelievers, and it certainly can have that meaning. But as many Bible teachers have pointed out, this principle also applies to any relationship that brings believers and unbelievers into close proximity and sharing of life or resources.

For example, what's so bad about a business partnership between a Christian and a non-Christian? According to Paul, it mixes two worlds that have nothing in common. It attempts to merge two ways of life, two allegiances, that are diametrically opposed to each other. The Bible says flatly, ""Friendship with the world is hatred toward God"" (James 4:4).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes it's hard for us to evaluate our friendships and our interaction with those who don't know Christ.

How can we know when it may be time to pull the plug on a relationship with an unbeliever? If sin of some sort is being committed, Paul answers the question for us: ""Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit"" (2 Cor. 7:1).

2 Corinthians 6:16 2 Chronicles 5:2-6:11

I will be their God, and they will be my people. - 2 Corinthians 6:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Most people like to keep some record of their journeys through life. Some write in personal diaries. Others put together photo albums or take up scrapbooking. Some use video cameras and software to create home movies—an update on the vacation slide shows of a previous generation. Others collect souvenirs and knick-knacks from their worldwide travels. Then there's everyone's favorite, the Christmas newsletter, in which (ideally) the major events of a given year are summarized in a burst of conciseness and creativity.

The objects placed in the ark in today's reading similarly served as records of the journey of the nation of Israel. The two tablets of the Law were reminders of the Mosaic covenant and God's faithful covenant love. You may have heard that a pot of manna and Aaron's rod (that budded) were also in the ark at some point, but this is uncertain. Hebrews 9:4 seems to indicate so, but Numbers 17:10 puts Aaron's rod in front of the tabernacle. Perhaps these tokens were in different places at different times, and they appear to have been lost by Solomon's day. Even so, the people would have remembered them as symbols of God's miraculous care and provision.

The dedication of the temple took place in 959 B.C. during the Feast of Tabernacles, a harvest festival (Lev. 23:34-43). This weeklong feast also commemorated the Exodus. Solomon made sure the entire occasion was invested with both solemnity and joy. All the key leaders were present and every part of the nation was represented. The priests and Levites had consecrated themselves and been assigned specific duties. Sacrifices were offered, accompanied by prayers, congregational worship, and music. The king pronounced a formal blessing. God's covenant with David was invoked as a key link in the chain of history (see 2 Samuel 7). The descent of God's glory on the temple signified His presence, approval, and guidance, just as it had with the tabernacle so long ago (5:13-14; Ex. 40:34-38).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The two tablets of the Law from Mount Sinai that were placed in the ark functioned as physical symbols and reminders of Israel's

spiritual history. No doubt you also have spiritually meaningful papers or objects around your home—for example, a framed baptismal certificate, or a bookmark from a church missions conference, or a photo of your small group having a picnic in the park. Give thanks for these occasions to remember and use them to reflect on God's guidance in your life.

2 Corinthians 6:18-20

Personal Purity

Temple worship in Israel was an awesome prospect, especially when the glory of God's presence filled the most holy place! Imagine your fear, your sense of frailty, your concern for personal purity, if you were called to serve inside the Temple of God. As the law prescribed, the priest who entered the holy place was to make offering for his own sins before standing before God to offer sacrifice for the people's sins. And sins committed outside the Temple would have to be covered before worship could take place. Imagine then the calamity that would occur if a worshiper actually committed sin inside the Temple. It would be an atrocity of the worst kind. To commit sin in the Temple would be unthinkable—and possibly fatal! With this picture in mind, Paul addressed believers who were immersed in the immoral and sexually-oriented culture of Corinth. To them the picture of committing immorality inside a place of worship would hit home, since temple prostitution was common in Corinth's pagan religions.

What must have had the greatest impact on Paul's readers, though, was not simply the distasteful idea of a person sinning inside a place of worship. It was the fact that their very bodies were now the temple of the Holy Spirit! This meant that for a believer, to commit any kind of immorality would be the same as a worshiper committing sin in the most solemn place of worship. The rationale is clear: if our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, then we must not profane that temple with any sort of sexual immorality. The alternative is to "honor God with your body," in the same way that a place of worship would be put to its proper use.

2 Corinthians 7

2 Corinthians 7:1 Hebrews 11:22; Genesis 50:15-26

Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit. - 2 Corinthians 7:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last August, the class of 1970 at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, finally held its commencement exercises. The 30-year delay was the result of a deadly tornado that struck the city on May 11, 1970, days before the university's graduation exercises. The ceremonies were called off as Lubbock dealt with the tragedy. A group of those 1970 graduates, now fifty-somethings with children old enough to graduate from college, participated in commencement exercises.

Some things are too important to be forgotten with the passage of time. We've been meeting "heroes from Hebrews" whose faith in God and His promises did not fade throughout more years than most of us expect to live. In fact, "These people were still living by faith when they died" (Heb. 11:13).

Joseph was one of these faith champions. His confidence in God never wavered from the time he was a seventeen-year-old sold into slavery in Egypt until he died at the age of 110. The writer of Hebrews could have drawn on many dramatic stories from Joseph's life to prove his faith.

But Hebrews 11:22 also speaks of Joseph's prophecy concerning Israel's future (Gen. 50:24-25). Woven into this account is a dramatic statement of faith in God's ability to keep His word.

Genesis 50:20 has been called the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament. It takes a faith perspective to realize that even the hateful actions of other people are part of God's greater plan for our good. Joseph's faith was put into action (James 2:18-26) when he embraced his brothers and their families instead of taking revenge on them.

But Joseph's greatest act of faith may have been his last act on earth. He looked ahead and believed that God would someday bring the Israelites out of Egypt and back into the promised land. Joseph's command to take his coffin with them was a statement of his confidence in God's fulfillment (Gen. 50:24-25).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Joseph's life is the embodiment of today's verse. He believed God's promises and made faith commitments that kept him true to God even in the face of temptation (Gen. 39:1-12).

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

God's kindness leads you toward repentance. - Romans 2:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his own words, John Newton "sinned with a high hand" before he met the Lord. After deserting from the British Navy, he was caught and severely disciplined. In lieu of further punishment, Newton persuaded his superiors to assign him to a slave ship. He eventually captained several slave ships, even after his conversion, although he tried to prevent the worst abuses of slavery. Finally, however, Newton became completely disgusted and quit the trade. To his dying day, he shuddered over his former involvement in slavery and fought the cruel trade in every way that he could, including assisting William Wilberforce.

When God convicts someone of sin, there will always be some positive outcome. In John Newton's case, godly sorrow spurred him on to fight injustice. In the case of the Corinthians, godly sorrow led them to repentance and godly growth. This is the second mention we've had of the "tearful" letter that Paul had written to the Corinthians (see 2 Cor. 2:4). Although that letter achieved its purpose, it's clear from 2 Corinthians that Paul still had to fight wrong perceptions.

This first part of today's passage indicates that some had accused Paul of wrongdoing, perhaps suggesting that he had ulterior motives for the collection to help Jewish believers in Jerusalem. This explains the great care that Paul took in writing this letter and his overwhelming expression of love for the Corinthians. It also explains the tremendous joy that he felt finally to receive a good report back from Titus.

Although difficult, Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church is a powerful example of love in the body of Christ. Paul would have laid down his life for the Corinthians. At the same time, he didn't hesitate to speak painful truth when necessary. He knew that godly sorrow, although painful, ultimately benefited them. If he hadn't confronted them, they would have grown more hardened and persisted in sin. But painful yet faithful words led to repentance and restoration.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To the Philippians, Paul wrote, "[I am] confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Phil. 1:6). Our expectations of other believers will always disappoint us unless we base our confidence on the Lord's work in them. Ultimately Paul's confidence wasn't in Corinthians themselves, but in the Lord in them. This is another way in which "we regard no one from a worldly point of view" but as new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-17).

2 Corinthians 7:2–12

In *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, historian John Dower details Japan's postwar reconstruction. They faced many physical challenges, such as rebuilding infrastructure. But Japan's greatest obstacle was their deep psychological despondency, what Japanese observers called the *Kyodatsu* condition. Originally used as a clinical term for individual patients, now it applied to the whole nation. For many, *kyodatsu* was the "great enemy that could destroy Japan."

One cannot repent without admitting fault, but true repentance should never leave us without hope. Our text today warns us of the dangers of wallowing in personal failure without reorienting our lives toward God.

Paul references his former "letter" (v. 8), which many believe to be 1 Corinthians, an epistle where Paul pulled no punches. Divisions, immorality—even turning the Lord's Supper into a drunken feast—Paul did not hesitate to spell out their sins. Notice that Paul did not relish his prophetic role. He genuinely cared about this church, and woe to any of us who exult in pointing out others' faults.

Paul makes clear that he did not rebuke them merely because he was angry or disappointed in them. He did not even criticize for the sole reason that they had sinned. As verse 9 tells us, Paul made them "sorry" in the hopes that it might produce repentance.

The context of 2 Corinthians is Paul's desire to vindicate his apostolic ministry. This is not Paul's indulgence in a touch of vanity here, for something much greater is at stake, namely, their perseverance in the faith (2 Cor 1:12–24). Paul's desire for their repentance made him a true apostle of Christ (2 Cor. 7:12).

Our text today reveals not only Paul's heart but God's as well. When we sense God confronting us with our sin, we must not focus on our sin alone. We must not think that God is merely angry with us. He seeks to move us beyond the worldly sorrow that leads us toward spiritual death. He wants us to be reborn. He wants us to have hope.

Apply the Word

Japan's tradition of *Bushido* called for "honorable" suicide after an ignominious defeat. In the same way, some people think that spiritual suicide is the only response to their sin and failures. This is not what God wants. He is able to bring good fruit from the muck of our defeat. He wants us to deal with our sin, but only because He wants us to be reborn. Godly sorrow "leaves no regret,"

for it turns our gaze from our weakness to hope in God's strength to restore us.

2 Corinthians 8

2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Freely you have received, freely give. - Matthew 10:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

"As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "'I tell you the truth,' he said, "'this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on'" (Luke 21:1-4).

For centuries the account of this poor, but generous, widow has both convicting and inspiring. We've no idea if the Macedonian churches had heard this part of Jesus' teaching, but even if they hadn't, they too knew how to give out of their poverty. The churches in Macedonia included those in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and perhaps some others not mentioned in Acts. Their generosity is even more remarkable when we realize that these churches were very poor. The book of Acts records the intense persecution that Paul and Silas faced while in these cities (see Acts 17-18). Thus the "most severe trial" (v. 2) they faced was probably for their faith and no doubt contributed to their extreme poverty. Additionally the entire Macedonia region had suffered economically from political turmoil and decreased trade. Perhaps these circumstances help explain the Macedonians' outpouring of generosity for the believers in Jerusalem who were also persecuted and impoverished. Not only did they give willingly, but they also "urgently pleaded" with Paul for the privilege of giving!

In stark contrast, the wealthy Corinthians had made an initial commitment toward the Jerusalem collection, but had failed to follow through. Tensions between Corinth and Paul probably encouraged their procrastination. Yet Paul didn't want them to miss out on this "grace of giving," especially given their experience of other spiritual gifts (v. 7). With their positive response to his painful letter, the time seemed right to entrust Titus with exhorting the Corinthians in this regard.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Financial giving isn't about how much money we have. The poor widow and the Macedonians show that poverty doesn't preclude generosity. Even so, giving doesn't come naturally, so we can be thankful the Bible repeatedly teaches about this subject. Giving isn't just about money—it enables us to participate in something greater than ourselves. Through our financial gifts, we're able to participate in ministries around the world and support our own local churches. Generosity also includes our presence, talents, and prayers.

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Giving was often a public matter in ancient Israel. People would deposit their gifts into a treasury box in the temple. One day, Jesus and His disciples sat and watched. Those with sizeable gifts made a big show of throwing in large amounts of money. Others dropped in their gifts more quietly. But one particular woman drew Jesus' attention—a poor widow who put in two small coins. He held her up as an example of faith and sacrificial generosity: "They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on" (Mark 12:41-44).

The Macedonians also excelled in the grace of sacrificial giving. Paul brought them to the attention of the Corinthians as an encouraging (and convicting) example. The Macedonians' "rich generosity" was proof of God's grace at work in their church, even in the midst of dire poverty and harsh trials (vv. 1-2). Despite the circumstances, God's grace led to their "overflowing joy," which in turn bubbled up into sacrificial giving.

"Sacrificial" means that they gave beyond any reasonable estimate of their ability to do so (vv. 3-4). Furthermore, they gave on their own initiative, with no external pressure from Paul or anyone else. Usually any urgent pleading comes from the people in need, but in this case it was the Macedonians requesting to share from their meager resources with their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

The Corinthians would do well to follow this example (vv. 6-8). Paul wrote that Titus, probably the bearer of this epistle, was entrusted with the task of completing the collection in Corinth for the same purpose. That is, the Corinthian church was also being called upon to give toward meeting the needs of poor believers in Jerusalem. They, too, should seek to "excel in this grace of giving." Paul didn't issue a command, but he was bold and forthright in saying that he regarded this offering as a test of the sincerity of their love. If they needed additional motivation, they need look no further than God's grace in Christ (v. 9).

Apply the Word

The metaphor in verse 9 is exquisite and meaningful. What does it mean to say that Jesus went from riches to poverty so that we could go from poverty to riches? Jesus' movement from riches to poverty is a way of describing the Incarnation. Laying aside the glories of heaven to walk as a man on earth shows incredible love. Our movement from poverty to riches is a way of describing redemption. The gospel accomplished in Christ takes us from condemnation and death to salvation and life.

2 Corinthians 8:9

Stickler for Correct Dress

British statesman and financier Cecil Rhodes, whose fortune was used to endow the world-famous Rhodes Scholarships, was a stickler for correct dress—but apparently not at the expense of someone else's feelings. A young man invited to dine with Rhodes arrived by train and had to go directly to Rhodes's home in his travel-stained clothes. Once there he was appalled to find the other guests already assembled, wearing full evening dress. After what seemed a long time Rhodes appeared, in a shabby old blue suit. Later the young man learned that his host had been dressed in evening clothes, but put on the old suit when he heard of his young guest's dilemma.

2 Corinthians 8:10–15

Unity in the early church was practiced in worship and evangelism, as well as in the handling of material possessions. "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need" (Acts 4:32–35).

Giving shows proper honor to the Lord and contributes to the health of the body of Christ. As mentioned yesterday, the Macedonians, Corinthians, and other Gentile churches were being exhorted to contribute to an ambitious collection on behalf of the Jerusalem church. The collection was a financial symbol of the spiritual truth that in Christ, barriers between Jew and Gentile had been taken down. Cultural and religious conflict and prejudice must give way to Spirit-infused love and unity. In Paul's words: "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him" (Rom. 10:12; cf. Col. 3:11). Because all believers are one spiritual body, the health of one part is the health of every part.

The collection project had gotten stuck in Corinth, but Paul sent Titus there to get things going again. They had been eager to participate, so now Paul advised them to "finish the work" (vv. 10–11). There was no command to give sacrificially, as the Macedonians had done. A willing gift appropriate to their means was perfectly acceptable. The point was willingness—to give out of joy, as an act of grace, for the privilege of serving one another (v. 12). Paul's goal was "equality" (vv. 13–15). This time Jerusalem needed their help; next time it might be the other way around. With both individuals and communities, God provides daily bread as needed, and He often uses the giving of others to meet that need.

Apply the Word

How we handle money, including our giving, is one marker of integrity and moral and spiritual quality (Ps. 37:21). That's why Paul challenged the Corinthians to "pass the test" and give generously to the Jerusalem collection. How are you doing with the principles and practices studied this month? What might be some areas for improvement? Might having an accountability partner in this area be a helpful idea? Pray for the grace to excel in giving to the work of God.

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Whoever sows generously will also reap generously. - 2 Corinthians 9:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

First-century Corinth was known for its wealth, luxury, and multicultural life. Paul visited Corinth twice, staying 21 months (Acts 18:11, 20:3). He also wrote two letters to the Corinthian church recorded in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul instructed the church regarding the love offering for the poor believers in Jerusalem (cf. Rom. 15:25). In today's reading, Paul raised the topic again.

He began by praising the generosity of the Macedonian churches of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (vv. 1-5). Their offering was a response to God's grace. Like Christians in Jerusalem, the Macedonian believers faced persecution resulting in social and economic ostracism. Though they were persecuted and impoverished, Paul described them as overflowing with joy and their gift as abundant. They even begged for the privilege of giving toward the offering. The Corinthian church had also committed to contributing to the collection (vv. 6, 10-11). Paul wrote to encourage them to fulfill their promise—and to test their sincerity (v. 8).

Do not only emulate the Macedonian churches, Paul urged. Imitate Christ's grace of giving (v. 9). Christ left the rich glory with the Father and became poor human flesh so that we might one day share in God's glory. Christ gave Himself sacrificially and voluntarily. Paul wanted the Corinthians to do the same.

Verses 10 through 12 portray three characteristics of the grace of giving: willingness, follow-through, and giving according to one's means. As Christianity grew beyond Jerusalem, Paul urged the same kind of sharing and caring for one another's needs exemplified in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 2:42-47) and among God's people in the wilderness (Ex. 16:18). Throughout the discussion of grace and giving that pervade today's passage, ultimately, it is God's grace that gives way to the church's act of grace in giving toward fellow believers.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Often we are uncomfortable when Christian workers talk about money, perhaps because we think about money and giving in ways incongruent with God's grace. Paul teaches that we can give generously precisely because God gives generously (vv. 1, 9) and He provides abundantly for all our needs (2 Cor. 9:8; Phil. 4:20). When we see giving as an opportunity to join God's ministry locally and globally (2 Cor. 8:4; cf. Phil. 1:5, 4:15), we will beg for this privilege like the Macedonian Christians did.

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Christ Jesus ... made himself nothing. - Philippians 2:5-7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Tom and Becky Henderson were full-time staff with a well-known university parachurch organization. While raising support, they ran into an interesting phenomenon. More than once, people would write the Hendersons a one-time check—even a generous one—but they wouldn't support the young couple on a monthly basis. The couple began to realize that many people feared a long-term commitment that might go on for several years.

Although reasons why people give or don't give are complex, most believe that giving is mainly about money. Second Corinthians 8-9 offers a helpful corrective to this faulty thinking. God's purposes for giving have to do with gratitude for what He has already done and love for our brothers and sisters in Christ—giving isn't just about writing a check or sending money.

As an apostle, Paul could have commanded the Corinthians to participate in the collection for poor believers in Jerusalem. Instead, he urged them to give as an expression of their sincere love. Recall that the Macedonian churches had given generously out of extreme poverty. In addition to their example, Paul appealed to the supreme example of sacrificial giving—the Lord Jesus Christ. Although Jesus wasn't wealthy during His incarnation, Paul didn't have material riches and poverty in mind. Jesus became poor by becoming human and temporarily setting aside the glory that He had enjoyed with the Father. The point is that believers can never give up what Jesus did, but they can love sacrificially as He did.

Paul offered two other reasons for the Corinthians to be generous. First, he wanted the Corinthians to finish what they had started. Although they had been first to commit to the Jerusalem collection, they had yet to act. Second, he wanted equality among believers. This doesn't mean that everyone has exactly the same amount of money. It means that no one needs and no one hoards. To illustrate, Paul quoted Exodus 16:18, recalling the Israelites' reliance upon manna while in the wilderness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Exodus 16 records that if the Israelites tried to hoard manna, it rotted and stank. The same is true when we hoard money ... or time ... or possessions. These things may not literally rot and stink—but, what's worse, something in our hearts does. Conversely, when we see that everything we have is from the Lord, gratitude leads to generosity. In fact, the example of the Macedonians shows that generosity has nothing to do with income; it comes from a thankful heart.

2 Corinthians 8:16-24

Avoid every kind of evil. - 1 Thessalonians 5:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

In an effort to protect public trust, the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) was founded in 1979. This accreditation council requires adherence to strict standards, including independent financial auditing and fundraising integrity. Thus donors are protected from unscrupulous groups, and organizations are protected from succumbing to methods that might bring dishonor to the cause of Christ. Currently over 2,000 evangelical organizations comprise the council.

Like other wise leaders, Paul knew that special care was needed when it came to money. For several years, he had been collecting

funds for famine-stricken believers in Jerusalem from Gentile churches. He knew he would be the object of suspicions given the large sum of money involved. In fact, some in Corinth apparently suggested that Paul used collection funds to line his own pockets. They may have used this to justify their own failure to give.

This explains the great care that Paul took in pursuing the Corinthians' contribution to the collection. If the ECFA had been around, Paul would have met and exceeded their stringent standards! He began by appealing to faithful Titus, who had just returned from Corinth with the "tearful" letter. We get a glimpse of Titus's own deep love for the Corinthians in his enthusiasm to turn around and undertake the arduous trip back to Corinth. Although asked by Paul, it's clear that he acted of his own initiative and desire.

In addition to Titus, Paul saw the wisdom of sending several respected brothers. First, there is an unnamed brother, who had been chosen by other churches, probably in Macedonia and Greece, to ensure the propriety of the collection. There have been many suggestions concerning this individual's identity, including Luke, but what's clear from the text is that this person was highly regarded. Additionally, another brother completed the group. The designation "our brother" indicates someone close to Paul. Such an individual could vouch that Paul's hands were completely clean regarding the collection.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In addition to the need for integrity when it comes to finances, today's passage offers two other lessons for giving. First, notice the eagerness of those involved with this major fundraising drive. They understood they weren't "just asking for money," but that they were participating in God's glorious work. Second, notice how this collection crossed cultural and ethnic boundaries. Charity begins at home, but it can never stop there. The church must extend beyond itself to minister to its brothers and sisters throughout the world.

2 Corinthians 9

2 Corinthians 9:1-5

Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution. - Romans 15:26

TODAY IN THE WORD

On August 15, 2007, the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped to 12,861. Just 18 days earlier, the Dow had set a new record high, closing over 14,000 for the first time. What happened? Risky lending practices associated with subprime home mortgages finally began to affect the market. Falling interest rates had made home ownership possible for millions. At the same time, some companies, eager for profit, also devised loans and methods that qualified borrowers with poor credit histories for high-interest loans by giving the appearance on paper that these borrowers had better finances than was actually the case. When interest rates rose again, these borrowers began to default on their loans and the reputations of several home mortgage companies were damaged, forcing them into bankruptcy.

Several times already we've noted the importance of integrity. This is especially true when people stake their reputations on another's integrity, as Paul did with the Corinthians. Paul shared with other churches about the Corinthians' enthusiasm for the Jerusalem collection, which encouraged these churches to contribute to the fund. The problem was that the Corinthians had only pledged the money. When Paul wrote this letter, they still hadn't fulfilled their promise.

Paul was concerned about negative consequences if other churches, especially the Macedonians, discovered the Corinthians' lack of integrity. These churches had given sacrificially. Paul was concerned that the Corinthians' failings might call into question his own integrity and jeopardize his efforts to help the Jerusalem church.

This explains why Paul was sending Titus and two other brothers in anticipation of his upcoming visit to Corinth. We know from Acts 20:4 that Macedonians accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the collection. They would have been with Paul on this final trip to Corinth. Paul knew that the honor of Christ as well as his reputation and that of the Corinthians could be damaged if they failed to keep their word.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It can be easy to undertake commitments lightly. We might agree to support a ministry after a compelling presentation. When it comes time to write the support check, however, we procrastinate. The same thing can happen when we sign up for a ministry team, only to find ourselves reluctant to make the required time commitments later on. In this regard, we can all be like the Corinthians. Yet we should also keep in mind that our lack of faithfulness affects many others, often far beyond what we could know.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Give generously ... without a grudging heart. - Deuteronomy 15:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Pastor Ray Stedman told the story of a man in Houston who received a letter from a Christian radio station seeking contributions. The station calculated that it needed \$76 from each listener to stay on the air. The letter promised that God couldn't be "out-given"—thus contributors could be assured that their \$76 would come back to them three-fold. The man wrote back to the station suggesting that they send him the \$76 first. That way the station would receive back three times the amount they needed to stay on the air!

Many people believe that giving is like a cosmic investment plan—give a certain amount and it will come back, with interest! At first glance, today's passage seems to support this thinking. Yet a deeper look shows a much different principle.

In the ancient world, like now, no farmer would sow grudgingly or sparingly, knowing that a little seed in the ground meant little fruit at harvest. So, just as farmers sow generously, God's people should also give generously. Paul followed this proverbial saying with a key principle. God gives to us first so that we can be generous. The order here is key. We don't give first so that we can receive a blessing. This is where the radio station got it wrong.

Knowing that God gives first encourages us that there's never a time when we can't be generous. This also encourages us that when we receive a little extra, it's not so that we can spend it all on ourselves. Instead, material blessings enable us to give even more to others.

Our generosity is a practical means of sharing the gospel, because others will see obedience linked with our verbal profession of Christ. What comes back to us is a spiritual, not material, blessing—namely, others praying for us (v. 14). Ultimately, giving brings us right back to where it all begins—God's indescribable gift of Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

"God loves a cheerful giver" because that's exactly what He is! God gives freely and beyond all we can imagine. This is true first and foremost in the gift of His Son, but it's also true every day we live and breathe. Take time this weekend to reflect on God's generosity in your life. If possible, join with family or friends, and write down specific examples of God's abundance. Then praise God together for the opportunity to live out of this generosity as you prepare for tomorrow's collection during church.

2 Corinthians 9:6–15

Nabal was a rich man who was "surly and mean in his dealings." When David asked him for provisions, he responded with an insult: "Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?" This was grossly unfair, for David and his men had acted with integrity, protecting Nabal's flocks rather than helping themselves to whatever they wanted, which they might have easily done. Righteously angry, David set out to teach this wicked man a lesson. On the road, he met Nabal's wife, Abigail, who, after being alerted to what was happening, wisely and generously brought the requested provisions. Shortly thereafter, God Himself struck Nabal dead (1 Samuel 25).

A stingy rich person is a person who doesn't understand the spiritual principle of sowing and reaping (v. 6; cf. Luke 6:38). Generous sowing leads to generous reaping, and vice versa. Such a person also doesn't understand that all good things are gifts from the Lord, and that our giving is merely a proper response to His gifts (v. 15). True giving starts with simple willingness and a decision in one's heart. There's no reluctance, no pressure, no guilt trips, no legalism, "for God loves a cheerful giver" (v. 7).

In the big picture, we can't outgive God. His grace abounds, which means we'll have everything we need, which in turn means our good works or acts of service can also abound (v. 8; cf. Eph. 2:10). Just as God literally provides both seed and bread, so too would He provide the "seed" (money) for this "harvest," that is, the collection, indicative of the Corinthians' generosity and righteousness (v. 10).

Paul restates that God would make the Corinthians "rich" in both funds and grace so that they could and would contribute generously to the Jerusalem offering (v. 11). These truths and actions would ripple outward in expanding circles of gratitude and mutual intercession within the body; the effect of their generosity would be the spread of the gospel and praise to the Lord (vv. 12–14).

Apply the Word

Many believers practice tithing, though the exact amount of 10 percent of our income is not an explicit New Testament command. But we should not let a certain percentage ever limit our generosity. When deciding how much of your resources to give back to God, consider His grace, your means, your heart, and any specific needs He has brought to your attention. One idea is to allocate at least 10 percent for your church, and other gifts can be given to other needs that God has put on your heart.

2 Corinthians 9:6–15

The prophet Elijah saw God's promise of famine come true in judgment for the sins of Ahab and Israel. In obedience to God, Elijah went to Zarephath and asked a widow to provide him with food. She responded that she had no bread, and only a little flour and oil. She was preparing a final meal for herself and her son. Elijah promised that if she would feed him, God would provide continuous food. She trusted God's promise, and He ensured that miraculously the "jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD" (see 1 Kings 17).

God's principles of godly generosity have not changed. When people offer what they have—whether much or little—to Him, He promises to bless them. One way that we grow in extending grace is by extending generosity to others as a ministry to God.

The context of our passage is Paul's request for the Corinthian church to contribute financially to the impoverished and persecuted church in Jerusalem. The poor churches in Macedonia had already sent an offering, but the wealthy church in Corinth had been rather stingy (see Acts 8; Phil. 4:14–19). Paul didn't want to coerce or manipulate the Corinthians, but he did want them to understand God's principles of generosity. God wanted voluntary, joyful giving (v. 7). Sometimes a lack of generosity stems from a fear of not having enough left over; believers cling to financial resources for security. But God promises to extend the grace and resources necessary in response to our giving (v. 8).

This passage is often used by prosperity gospel preachers to assert that God has a mathematical formula—give a dollar and get \$100 in return!—or that God wants all Christians to be rich. In contrast, notice what Paul emphasized: our money is not what enables us to live for God. Our money is a tool to serve God, and His grace enables us to pursue good works of service. The emphasis is not on getting rich, but on seeking "every good work," "righteousness," and "thanksgiving to God" (vv. 8, 10, 11, 13). Generosity exhibits obedience consistent with our confession of the gospel. God has extended His grace to us so that we can extend generosity to others (v. 14).

Apply the Word

This text connects our willingness to release our financial resources to serve God with our ability to grow spiritually. There's no formula or percentage demanded; God cares about the state of our hearts. Are you willing to give financially to support your church, missionaries, or other ministries doing the work of God? Are you giving joyfully? Do you give the bare minimum, desiring to hold tightly to your money? Our security is in Christ, not our bank account. He promises to bless our generosity.

2 Corinthians 9:13ff

Amazing Alliance

Trees have made an alliance with another amazing microscopic symbiont, mycorrhiza fungi. Beneath the typical tree, roots generally reach half as deep and twice as wide as the tree we see above ground. When the roots of two trees touch, a battle for dominance usually ensues—unless the mycorrhiza fungi are on the scene. Forest scientist David Perry of Oregon State University has found that these fungi not only reduce competition between the trees but also link together roots from trees of the same or even different species. In one experiment, Perry grew seedlings and watched their roots join through the mycorrhiza. Then the scientist cast shade over one of the seedlings. The shaded tree began to draw nutrients from the sunlit tree through the fungal linkage between them.

"Thanks to these fungi," says Perry, "It could be that a whole forest is linked together like a community. If one tree has access to water, another to nutrients, a third to sunlight, the trees apparently can share with one another."

"What Good is a Tree?" Lowell Ponte, March 1990, Reader's Digest

2 Corinthians 9:14

Padarewski

Many years ago two boys were working their way through Stanford University. Their funds got desperately low, and the idea came to them to engage Padarewski for a piano recital. They would use the funds to help pay their board and tuition. The great pianist's manager asked for a guarantee of \$2,000. The guarantee was a lot of money in those days, but the boys agreed and proceeded to promote the concert. They worked hard, only to find that they had grossed only \$1,600.

After the concert the two boys told the great artist the bad news. They gave him the entire \$1,600, along with a promissory note for \$400, explaining that they would earn the amount at the earliest possible moment and send the money to him. It looked like the end of their college careers.

"No, boys," replied Padarewski, "that won't do." Then, tearing the note in two, he returned the money to them as well. "Now," he told them, "take out of this \$1,600 all of your expenses, and keep for each of you 10 percent of the balance for your work. Let me have the rest."

The years rolled by—World War I came and went. Padarewski, now premier of Poland, was striving to feed thousands of starving people in his native land. There was only one man in the world who could help him, Herbert Hoover, who was in charge of the U.S. Food and Relief Bureau. Hoover responded and soon thousands of tons of food were sent to Poland.

After the starving people were fed, Padarewski journeyed to Paris to thank Hoover for the relief sent him.

“That’s all right, Mr. Padarewski,” was Hoover’s reply. “Besides, you don’t remember it, but you helped me once when I was a student at college, and I was in trouble.”

2 Corinthians 9:15, John 1:1-18

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! - 2 Corinthians 9:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

This time of year it's common to find portraits of Jesus on covers of news magazines with captions such as “Who Was Jesus Really?” Public fascination with Jesus never seems to cease! As Bible scholar John Drane notes, “[Jesus] has never had an advertising manager, yet for decades the stories of his life have featured among the world's best-sellers.”

How could one man who lived so long ago still captivate so many people? The answer is that He not only lived and died 2,000 years ago, but that He also rose from the dead and lives still. So the question isn't really “Who Was Jesus?,” but rather “Who Is Jesus?”—the focus of our study this month.

The opening verses of John's Gospel are an excellent place to begin to answer this question. This passage presents two crucial truths about the nature of Christ: He is fully God and He is fully human. To deny either aspect of Christ's nature is heresy.

Although Matthew and Luke focus on Jesus' birth, John's Gospel takes us back to creation to show that Jesus has always existed and has always been with the Father (vv. 1-2). John's title for Jesus, the Word, underscores that Jesus is the fullest revelation of the triune God. As verse 18 notes, no one has seen God, probably an allusion to the account of Moses asking to see God's glory (Exodus 33-34), yet those who have seen the Son can indeed behold the glory of God.

The idea that God would become flesh (v. 14) is so radical that no other religion makes such a claim. When Jesus became incarnate, He did not somehow magically appear human, He actually became a human being. The language in verse 14 recalls the idea of God dwelling among His people in the tabernacle. Through Jesus' incarnation, the promise that echoes throughout the Old Testament of God dwelling with His people is fulfilled.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This past year, Today in the Word has considered the good and perfect gifts that God gives. It's appropriate to end the year focusing on Jesus—the best of God's gifts and the One who makes all gifts possible. It's also a wonderful way to enter fully this Advent season as we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we begin our study, you might consider reading the remarkable text of “One Solitary Life,” accessible at this Web site: www.changinglivesonline.org.

2 Corinthians 10

2 Corinthians 10:1–6

Dieter Dengler was a German-born U.S. Navy pilot who escaped from a Laotian prison camp during the Vietnam War. He survived for 23 days in the harsh jungle before being rescued, considered one of the most amazing escapes ever by a prisoner of war. His survival has been credited to his willingness to forage for food and eat anything as well as his mental discipline under adversity. Though his body might have been captured, Dengler's mind was constantly planning for his escape.

This kind of mental discipline comes from character, training, and adversity (Dengler grew up foraging for food in the Black Forest during World War II). Spiritual discipline comes in much the same way, and it is required for our growth in the knowledge of God. This is an active engagement, not a passive one. Our passage today provides a helpful contrast to the willful suppression of the knowledge of God that we studied yesterday.

As we have seen in our other passages from Paul's letters to the church in Corinth, the Apostle contrasted worldly standards and spiritual ones (v. 2). The Corinthians had misjudged the value of worldly techniques and arguments. They were distracted from the

pursuit of God by worldly assessments of success.

These distractions were leading them away from the knowledge of God, and Paul actively resisted anything that moved him further from the Lord. Notice the verbs he used: “demolish” and “take captive” (vv. 4–5). When presented with the allure of temptation, we should respond with spiritual weapons to demolish the mirage. When urged to follow the crowd instead of following Christ, we must run closer to Him. When pursuing our own pleasure or status threatens to derail our spiritual fellowship, we must take our thoughts captive and submit them to the Lord.

Yesterday we saw the active suppression of the knowledge of God. Today we see an active pursuit of the knowledge of God. Paul did not depict this as an easy stroll in the park. He described it as a battle with the highest stakes—our own lives. Every thought must be in obedience to Christ.

Apply the Word

In this life, we are not free from the temptation and allure of sin. How do we pursue the knowledge of God and take our thoughts captive for Christ? Only through spiritual disciplines—daily Bible study, prayer, and time with God. We also must reject our own pretensions that we know best or that we can handle temptation on our own. Finally, we can encourage each other through fellowship, prayer, and study together to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb. 12:2–3).

2 Corinthians 10:1-18

Let him who boasts boast in the Lord. - 2 Corinthians 10:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

In *The Wizard of Oz*, a tornado takes Dorothy and her dog Toto far from Kansas to the land of Oz. On their own, they're powerless to return. Only the great and powerful Wizard of Oz can help them. As they travel to the Emerald City to find the Wizard, they're joined by the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion. Together they endure trials and terrors, but none compares to the fright of standing before the mighty Oz. Imagine the utter shock to find out that this powerful wizard, feared far and wide, is actually a bumbling old man pulling switches and levers behind a screen!

Paul's opponents had a similar image of Paul. They claimed that he was bold in his letters, but timid in person. So, once again, Paul was forced to defend his apostolic authority. The sudden shift in tone from 2 Corinthians 9 has led some to suggest that 2 Corinthians 10-13 was originally a separate letter. These scholars claim that it's unlikely that Paul would follow an appeal for money with such strong language. But there are good reasons for considering 2 Corinthians a unified letter. It seems that Paul was trying to deal with a number of difficult circumstances by letter in anticipation of his upcoming visit. He certainly wasn't afraid to deal forcefully with any issue (v. 11), but he wanted his visit to be a time of joyful fellowship instead of painful confrontation.

As we've noted already, Paul's concern wasn't for himself but rather for the gospel. If the Corinthians had been persuaded by these false teachers, they would have succumbed to a false gospel. So Paul had to confront them. Notice, however, his “tactics.” Rather than use the worldly means of his opponents, Paul realized that behind their efforts lay demonic strongholds consisting of pretensions against the knowledge of God. Once again, Paul showed that reliance on God's power was no sign of weakness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Ephesians 6:12 reads: “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Those who oppose the gospel aren't the real enemies. Behind their efforts is the Evil One who opposes God's work in every way. This is why our weapons aren't worldly ones. We pray against every pretension raised up against God. By the Spirit's leading, we expose faulty arguments for what they truly are.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's conversion to Christ in a Siberian prison camp is a remarkable testimony to the truth of today's text. Solzhenitsyn was being examined one day by a fellow prisoner, a Jewish physician who had been won to Christ by the example of another prisoner. Noticing the misery in Solzhenitsyn's eyes, the doctor told him his story, including his faith in Christ. Solzhenitsyn came to faith through the doctor's testimony and survived to tell the world about the power of the spirit over human evil.

What an incredible example of waging war by the weapons of the Holy Spirit! When His people call on Him, no prison or army can lock out the Word and the power of God. Aside from the description of our spiritual armor in Ephesians 6 (which we will study beginning tomorrow), today's passage may be the most critically important on this month's topic.

We don't have to guess about the context because Paul sets the stage for us. He is talking about waging war, using weapons, and demolishing enemy strongholds.

The King James Version helps us here, because "flesh" is a better rendering than "world" in verses 3-4. Paul is saying that although we live in human bodies, we don't wage war according to human standards. Our weapons are those of the Spirit, so they have His power behind them. These are the only weapons great enough to bring down "strongholds."

What is a stronghold? Moody Press author Jim Logan, in his book *Reclaiming Surrendered Ground*, explains that strongholds are the fortresses Satan builds in our lives when we give him a foothold, a piece of ground on which to build.

How does Satan gain a foothold in our hearts and minds? We give him ground when we sin and refuse to forsake our sin or when we believe his lies. Satan is a master builder. He doesn't need much ground on which to erect his strongholds. And once they are in place, they give the enemy a "headquarters" from which to carry on his activities.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The principles found in these few verses are so important that we could spend all week exploring their implications.

2 Corinthians 11

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. - Exodus 20:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

Set in Czarist Russia, the popular musical *Fiddler on the Roof* follows the trials faced by the lovable Tevye, which include finding suitable husbands for his five daughters. Although arranged marriages are no longer common in the West, a father's responsibility to protect his daughter's honor and to secure a proper husband for her has been the norm throughout much of history and is the backdrop for today's passage.

To demonstrate his deep love for the Corinthians, Paul likened his relationship with them to a father and daughter. Paul used the common biblical imagery of adultery to describe spiritual infidelity to stress how deeply he feared that the Corinthians were being seduced by false teaching, which likely disputed the importance of the crucified Christ. Paul was jealous for the Corinthians' spiritual purity: a different gospel, with a different Jesus and different Spirit, was no gospel at all.

Because of his concern, Paul was willing to engage in the "foolishness" of justifying his actions to the Corinthians. Given his apostolic authority, he certainly didn't need to do so. One major accusation he faced concerned not charging a fee for his preaching while in Corinth. Although we're usually happy to get something for nothing, in Greco-Roman culture it was a significant insult to refuse a wealthy person's gift. By supporting himself, Paul looked more like a common laborer than a prestigious teacher who could command a high salary. To the status-conscious Corinthians, this made them look bad.

Furthermore, the Corinthians accused Paul of loving other churches more because he had accepted their financial assistance. But Paul knew that accepting help from the Corinthians would have put him in inferior position to this wealthy church—a position from which he wouldn't have been free to speak frankly and truthfully. Indeed he never would have been able to call the "super-apostles"—who gladly accepted Corinthian money—what they truly were: masquerading servants of Satan.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Unlike other false teachers, the "super-apostles" didn't deny fundamental truths about Christ, such as His full humanity and full divinity. But they focused on victory rather than suffering, and glory rather than crucifixion. In doing so, they distorted the true gospel. The same is true today when preachers promise prosperity and success, often in material terms, to those who follow Jesus. This false teaching doesn't prepare people for the reality of living in a fallen world and the need to persevere in trust and faithfulness.

2 Corinthians 11:1–15

Subtlety of Temptation: Half-Truths

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals that the Lord God made.

Genesis 3:1

Last October a church janitor opened fire on the Atlanta congregation where he was once employed, killing the man who was

leading the prayer service. In December, a gunman killed Kimberly Scott as she decorated for a children's Christmas party at her church near Altoona, Pennsylvania.

We don't usually suspect the motives or intentions of those sitting right next to us in the pew. The place where we worship feels like it should be the safest place. It's where we can let our guard down—or can we? The apostle Paul talks today about the subtle maneuvering of the “false apostles” in Corinth in the very context of “church.”

In the book of 2 Corinthians, which was probably the third or fourth letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, Paul was on the defensive. A strong, vocal group of dissenters publicly criticized Paul's apostolic qualifications and the methods of his ministry. They commended themselves as superior to Paul and sought to win the loyal following of the Corinthian church.

Paul makes clear that it is not only his ministry that is at stake: it's the faith and devotion of the Corinthian church. Paul is bold and unequivocal, branding the false apostles as servants of Satan. He exposes their game as a charade: they've sought not to replace the gospel but to counterfeit it. They haven't done away with Jesus, but the Jesus they proclaim is not the Jesus of Nazareth whom Paul met on the road to Damascus.

Paul warns the Corinthians of Satan's deceptive tactics. He reminds them how Eve fell prey to this same subtle strategy of distorting God's Word.

Apply the Word

There are enemies within the church, and they aren't usually as easy to recognize as someone waving a loaded gun. Satan does not want anyone devoted to Jesus and the gospel. Our charge is to be like the Bereans, who studied the Scriptures diligently and tested the truthfulness of every teaching against God's revelation (Acts 17).

2 Corinthians 11:6-12:19

Everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. - 2 Corinthians 12:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Essayists James and Kate Williams reflected on humor and Christians: “The best humor, seen among both believers and unbelievers, is redemptive in orientation... In an argument, humor can gently or uproariously sweep away the sinful battlements built by pride, which desires always to be taken seriously.”

In our passage, Paul pleaded with the church in Corinth and used sarcasm and pointed humor to sweep away their foolish pride. We can identify parallels between Elijah's taunts designed to provoke the Israelites to choose God and Paul's sarcastic rhetoric intended to prod the Corinthians to identify with Christ.

First, just as Ahab had originally labeled Elijah as the troublemaker, the Corinthians had treated Paul as a fool. This church found itself enthralled by false apostles who used the latest and greatest rhetorical techniques to convince the Corinthians that they had a “new and improved” gospel. Paul was depicted as a bumpkin, in part because he didn't demand a fee for his preaching services (see 2 Cor. 11:1-15).

Second, like Elijah had done with Ahab, Paul understood that his beloved church had inverted reality. To shock them into recognizing their dangerous error, he declared, “You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!” (11:19)—and then proceeded to outline exactly what their so-called wisdom looked like: they embraced preachers who manipulated, abused, and exploited them! In contrast, Paul loved them.

The charge that Paul was an unworthy apostle because he had not taken their money sounds absurd: “I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!” (12:13). The pointed edge of Paul's cry should have prompted the Corinthians to realize that they were wrong, not Paul.

Paul did not use sarcasm in this letter to score rhetorical points with the Corinthians or to demonstrate his superiority and put them in their place. Rather, he longed for the Corinthians to see the truth of their situation so that they would stand strong for Christ (see 12:20-21). By exposing their folly, he wanted to renew their faith.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes someone we love embraces a lie and declares that it is truth. Our study yesterday and today can help us think about how to respond. We might need to use sarcasm to puncture the delusion and to provoke a return to reality. But more importantly, like both Elijah and Paul, we must be willing to humble ourselves before God, and then seek the restoration of our loved one (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10, 19).

2 Corinthians 11:6–12:19

Essayists James and Kate Williams reflected on humor and Christians: “The best humor, seen among both believers and unbelievers, is redemptive in orientation... In an argument, humor can gently or uproariously sweep away the sinful battlements built by pride, which desires always to be taken seriously.”

In our passage, Paul pleaded with the church in Corinth and used sarcasm and pointed humor to sweep away their foolish pride. We can identify parallels between Elijah’s taunts designed to provoke the Israelites to choose God and Paul’s sarcastic rhetoric intended to prod the Corinthians to identify with Christ.

First, just as Ahab had originally labeled Elijah as the troublemaker, the Corinthians had treated Paul as a fool. This church found itself enthralled by false apostles who used the latest and greatest rhetorical techniques to convince the Corinthians that they had a “new and improved” gospel. Paul was depicted as a bumpkin, in part because he didn’t demand a fee for his preaching services (see 2 Cor. 11:1–15).

Second, like Elijah had done with Ahab, Paul understood that his beloved church had inverted reality. To shock them into recognizing their dangerous error, he declared, “You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!” (11:19)—and then proceeded to outline exactly what their so-called wisdom looked like: they embraced preachers who manipulated, abused, and exploited them! In contrast, Paul loved them.

The charge that Paul was an unworthy apostle because he had not taken their money sounds absurd: “I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!” (12:13). The pointed edge of Paul’s cry should have prompted the Corinthians to realize that they were wrong, not Paul.

Paul did not use sarcasm in this letter to score rhetorical points with the Corinthians or to demonstrate his superiority and put them in their place. Rather, he longed for the Corinthians to see the truth of their situation so that they would stand strong for Christ (see 12:20–21). By exposing their folly, he wanted to renew their faith.

Apply the Word

Sometimes someone we love embraces a lie and declares that it is truth. Our study yesterday and today can help us think about how to respond. We might need to use sarcasm to puncture the delusion and to provoke a return to reality.

But more importantly, like both Elijah and Paul, we must be willing to humble ourselves before God, and then seek the restoration of our loved one (see 2 Cor. 12:9–10, 19).

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

We are fools for Christ. - 1 Corinthians 4:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to a University of Michigan survey, overall customer satisfaction with air travel continued to decline in 2007. Travelers cited lost or damaged luggage, long delays or flight cancellations, and unhelpful airline personnel among their major grievances. For many frequent flyers, travel has become more difficult and less pleasant. Even with all these hassles, modern travelers can barely imagine what Paul endured in his day.

Travel in the ancient world was difficult and dangerous, so many people never traveled. This makes Paul’s extensive travels all the more remarkable. Yet traveling was only one hardship that Paul willingly endured for the gospel.

We noted yesterday that, out of love for the Corinthians, Paul answered their false accusations. Today we see that Paul also countered the arrogant boasting of his opponents with some “foolish boasting” of his own. By doing so, he exposed their true foolishness. The Corinthians willingly endured quite a bit from these “fools,” including enslaving and degrading treatment. Paul uses irony (v. 21) to show that a true apostle would never exploit them.

Apparently these false apostles boasted in their Jewish heritage. Philippians 3:3-6 indicates that Paul’s Jewish heritage was impeccable. These “super-apostles” also boasted about what they had suffered for Christ. They picked the wrong opponent, because Paul could “out boast” every one of them. For example, the Jewish punishment of “forty lashes minus one” could kill a person. The fact that Paul survived this five times revealed both his love for his own people and God’s sustaining power for his body. Despite numerous tangible hardships, nothing compared with the pressing concern that he felt for all the churches. If the Corinthian church is an indication, Paul must have paid a high price in this regard.

Finally, Paul referenced the humiliating way that he fled Damascus soon after his conversion. Although he wanted to crush

Christianity, he was humbled by the risen Lord.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The “super-apostles” must have seemed imposing. Yet often, true servants of Christ aren't all that impressive. It can be tempting to look for leaders who have a powerful personality or a certain charisma. To be sure, some godly leaders also have these characteristics. Yet we must be careful that we're not using worldly standards to evaluate our Christian leaders. A faithful, trustworthy pastor or elder is far more valuable than the polish or dynamism of one whose arrogance ultimately enslaves and leads away from the gospel.

2 Corinthians 12

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

When I am weak, then I am strong. - 2 Corinthians 12:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

A phenomenon is occurring throughout the Muslim world. A growing number of Muslims report having dreams in which Jesus appears to them. Frequently, these dreams concern Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection—events either not acknowledged or denied in Islamic teaching. As the result, thousands are coming to Christ and new converts often boldly proclaim the gospel, even at risk of death.

Although some are skeptical of dreams and visions, the Bible and church history record numerous examples of God speaking in this way. Unfortunately, unscrupulous individuals have also exploited the power of visionary experiences. This is apparently what was happening in Corinth. Paul's opponents probably used visions to authenticate their apostolic claims. Paul had to set the record straight.

It's a bit curious that Paul used the third person to refer to his own vision of the third heaven, a popular Jewish expression for Paradise. This probably indicates his conviction that this was an issue between God and him. The fact that Paul had spent so much time with the Corinthians without ever mentioning this event implies this conclusion as well. In other words, visions weren't used as the basis of his apostolic authority. Moreover, Paul's language of being “caught up” indicates that he hadn't sought this vision, rather it was completely God's doing.

What a contrast to the false apostles' boasting. In fact, to keep Paul from boasting about this surpassingly great revelation, the Lord allowed a messenger of Satan to inflict Paul with a “thorn” in his flesh, most likely some type of medical ailment. This account also shows God's complete control over the demonic realm.

We might think that the prayers of the apostle Paul would be effective enough to take away this ailment. But the issue isn't about praying “enough,” but submitting to God's sovereign will. In this way, the Lord's all-sufficient grace could be manifest through Paul's weakness. Paul could boast in his weaknesses, because through them, God was glorified.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

While we should rejoice over the reports of those in the Muslim world who have come to Christ through remarkable means, it is important to recognize that the spread of the gospel through dreams and visions is the exception rather than the rule. Visions from God aren't available “on-demand.” God's revelation to Paul was an unsolicited gift. Paul was very hesitant even to mention his experience. Believers with similar experience should take care that if they share it with others, it glorifies God and leads people to Christ.

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

We dealt with each of you as a father. - 1 Thessalonians 2:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Japanese culture values politeness and formality. This is especially true when it comes to giving gifts. Once a gift is received, it's expected that a gift will be given in return. This gift must be chosen carefully. A gift is an expression of status, so an inappropriate gift could bring shame upon an individual. Giving the same gift to different individuals could be insulting.

Every culture has its own set of rules for proper behavior. As we've noted before, patron-client relationships in Paul's day were prevalent. In general, these formal rules would have been inappropriate in a parent-child relationship. Parents generally saw

themselves as protectors who helped their children succeed in life. We can imagine the pain Paul felt when his Corinthian “children” treated him according to formal patronage rules.

In the first part of today's passage, Paul concluded his “boasting” by stressing that the true marks of an apostle had been repeatedly manifest to the Corinthians. They had seen all that they needed to know that Paul, not the super-apostles, was the real thing.

Just a few remaining issues needed to be cleared up before Paul could undertake another visit to Corinth. First, Paul underscored that the basis of their relationship was family, not patrons or clients. Love and integrity, not obligation and debt, drove Paul. The same was true for Titus and the other brothers sent by Paul.

Second, Paul clarified that his words shouldn't be construed as a defense. This probably surprised the Corinthians! But a defense would have given credibility to their charges and implied that Paul had been wrong. Paul's concern was for the gospel. To refute false charges was to prevent false apostles from gaining a foothold.

Third, Paul turned the tables by suggesting a few charges of his own. He worried that the Corinthians' past ungodliness hadn't been fully renounced. If so, he would have been humiliated for having labored in vain.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Christians aren't expected to be perfect, and both confession and repentance are important parts of the Christian life. At the same time, expecting godliness within a Christian community is entirely appropriate. Given that the Corinthians weren't new believers, Paul was right to expect repentance, sexual purity, and spiritual maturity from those who had “sinned earlier.” The same is true for believers today. True spiritual maturity is reflected in true godliness.

2 Corinthians 13

2 Corinthians 13:1-14

A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. - Deuteronomy 19:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

Every parent knows the importance of follow-through. Once children figure out that words have no meaning and that no consequences follow misbehavior, they usually push the limits to see just how far they can go and still get away with more disobedience. Unfortunately, not much changes from children to adults.

Apparently the Corinthians had persuaded themselves, helped by the false apostles, that Paul wasn't much of a threat. Sure, he wrote difficult letters, but when confrontations arose, he backed off quickly enough. A quick recap of Paul's visits to Corinth will be helpful. Paul's first stay in Corinth is recorded in Acts 18:1-17. Second Corinthians indicates that he made a short, painful visit sometime later, and had intended to visit again, but held off for fear of causing more pain (2 Cor. 2:1). This had been misinterpreted to mean that Paul didn't carry through with his warnings. Thus Paul made sure that the Corinthians understood that the admonitions contained in his current letter (2 Corinthians) weren't idle. He was fully prepared to carry out his warnings on this third visit.

This intent is evident in Paul's abrupt quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15. Some suggest that this refers to Paul's three visits, but another interpretation explains the Deuteronomy text better. Whereas Paul had previously dealt with individuals privately, this time he would judge unrepentant sinners publicly, on the testimony of two other witnesses, probably Titus and Timothy. If the Corinthians wanted proof of Paul's apostolic authority, they would find it in God's power working through his “weakness.” Even so, Paul still hoped these Corinthians would repent and not fail the test of their faith.

It's probable that this occurred. According to Acts 20:2-3, Paul stayed in Corinth for three months. The brevity of the account and the likelihood that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans during this stay in Corinth indicate that this third trip was peaceful.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Our study has covered difficult territory. But the final benediction offers a helpful summary. First, aiming for perfection includes the restoration that comes from repentance and spiritual maturity. Second, it is important to heed the authority of all Scripture. Third, being of one mind, living in peace, and greeting one another with holy affection negates preoccupation with worldly standards and status. Finally, the grace, love, and fellowship stressed in this letter are only possible through God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

2 Corinthians 13:5–10

Intercession: Prayer to Pass God's Test

Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. 2 Corinthians 13:7

Community is a vital component of the Christian life, and being a part of a healthy, caring church is a joy. But anyone who's been a part of a church can tell you no congregation is perfect. Still, one would be hard-pressed to find a church in as much turmoil as Corinth.

Based on 1 and 2 Corinthians, we know that the church struggled with an array of issues: sexual ethics, whether to eat food sacrificed to pagan gods, the status of spiritual gifts, and money management. At the root of many of these troubles was a concern for spiritual status, a festering problem that grew into a full-blown outbreak some time between the two letters. Paul's own apostolic authority had come under attack by factions within the church who claimed that their own spiritual leadership was superior.

Paul spent the chapters leading up to today passage vigorously defending his own position as an apostle. And then in verses 5 through 10 he turned the tables and asked the Corinthians to defend their own positions. Paul was concerned that if the Corinthians continued or resumed denying his apostolic authority, they would undermine their faith in God's plan for salvation.

At stake was not Paul's pride, but the redemption of those who would deny that Paul was a divinely appointed representative of Jesus Christ on earth and therefore deny the gospel message Paul proclaimed. The situation was dire and so Paul turned to intercessory prayer, asking God that the Corinthians "not do anything wrong" (v. 7). Praying that our friends and family do no wrong is a powerful blessing, and in offering this prayer Paul modeled true leadership. He practiced what he preached in verse 10, "the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down."

Apply the Word

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (v. 5). If the Corinthians reflected on their commitment to the gospel—allowing the Holy Spirit to confirm His grace in their lives—they would submit to godly authority. This reflection will also help our lives re-align with His Word.

2 Corinthians 13:12 Romans 16:16;

TODAY IN THE WORD

British novelist P.G. Wodehouse dreaded casual social events; but his wife, Ethel, loved to give parties. During one party, some late-arriving guests were confronted at the door by Wodehouse himself rather than by the butler. Although he recognized the group as friends, Wodehouse put out his hands, gesturing for them to go away. "Don't come in," he said. "Don't come in. You'll hate it!"

That's certainly one way to "greet" people we care for, but it's not recommended for believers! On several occasions, Paul urged his readers to greet one another with a kiss which he termed "holy," which lifted it out of any sensual context. Peter called it a "kiss of love," underscoring the value of genuine affection among God's people.

The practice of greeting others with a kiss was nothing new in the apostles' day. The Jews traditionally greeted one another this way. How valuable was this greeting? Jesus once reprimanded a host with these words: "I came into your house... [but] you did not give me a kiss" (Luke 7:44-45). As He said this, our Lord was being ministered to by a prostitute who was wiping His feet with her hair and kissing them. Jesus approved of her actions (vv. 44-46) and chided His host for failing to show the expected sign of greeting and honor.

Many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures still practice the kiss of greeting today. It has long since passed out of custom in the Western church, however, at least as a cultural practice used to indicate respect and affection.

So how can we obey this injunction of Scripture? Some say that a handshake or a hug is our culture's version of the "holy kiss." Others have attempted to practice the kiss, although it feels culturally strange and doesn't carry the same significance for us. Complicating matters is the fact that for many in our sexually sensitive society, a kiss can send some wrong messages.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One way to express affection and appreciation is with a handwritten note.

We may have good intentions along these lines, but too often our plans don't translate into actions. So why not put a blank note card or piece of stationery and envelope in your Bible today?