

Sermons on 2 Corinthians-Robert Morgan

Introduction - Robert J Morgan is the teaching pastor at [Donelson Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee](#) and is well known for expository messages that are rich in excellent illustrations of Biblical principles. These sermons are older messages preached on various passages in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 1:3-11 Thank God for Pressure

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many (2 Corinthians 1:3-11, NIV)

Peer Pressure. Blood pressure. Barometric pressure. Atmospheric pressure. Financial pressure. High pressure. Low pressure. Water pressure. Air pressure. Time pressure. Pressure sores. Pressure suits. Pressure cookers. Pressure washers. Pressure players. Grace under pressure. Cool under pressure. Cracking under pressure.

Today's world is all about pressure. It's a word that screams at us every day from the news. Just as I was writing this message, I've seen headlines from newspapers around the world, reading:

- Labor Unions Turn Up Pressure
- LA Times Editor Resigns Under Pressure
- Scientists Use Pressure to Melt Diamond
- International Pressure on North Korea is Working
- Many in Military Face Financial Pressure
- Pakistan's President Under Mounting Pressure
- Blood Pressure a Factor in Eye Disease

In my reading of biographies and autobiographies, I've been amazed at the levels of stress the human body and soul can endure. Currently, I'm finishing a biography of Abraham Lincoln. He had no sooner won the presidency and taken the oath of office before the nation broke apart and presented him with a crisis for which there was no answer. The book I'm reading pictures him pacing back and forth in the dead of night in the White House, deeply depressed, unable to sleep, distraught by the death of his little boy, vexed by his unbalanced wife, clutching disastrous memos about the course of the Civil War, and plaintively crying, "What will the nation think? What will the nation think?"

No one gets through life without incredibly stressful moments, and sometimes those moments can turn into months and years. But there's one book in the Bible that has surprised me with its ability to encourage and comfort, and that's Paul's letter of 2 Corinthians.

I fell in love with this book a couple of years ago when Katrina and I took a mini-vacation to Chicago. Our hotel on Michigan Avenue was near the Hancock Tower. Every morning as Katrina got ready for the day, I walked down to the plaza, grabbed a cup of coffee, and poured over this book. It was during those mornings that I realized this is the most autobiographical of Paul's writings, the closest he ever came to baring his soul and describing how the pressures of his life and ministry almost crippled him.

One morning there in the Hancock Plaza, I read through the entire book in one sitting (it only takes a few minutes) and jotted down all the phrases Paul used to describe his various difficulties. When I was finished, I could hardly believe the list that had appeared on that page in my journal.

- All our troubles
- Great distress, anguish of heart, many tears
- Great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure
- Grieved
- Distressed
- No peace of mind
- The hardships we suffer
- Despairing even of life
- Not equal to the task
- Not competent
- Deadly peril
- Hard pressed on every side
- Harassed at every turn
- Struck down
- Perplexed
- Downcast
- Beaten
- Flogged
- Shipwrecked
- Weak
- Sorrowful
- Poor
- Sleepless nights
- Affliction
- Made a fool of myself
- I am afraid... I fear...
- We may seem to have failed
- Conflicts on the outside, fears within
- A thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan
- Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches

Yet despite all these phrases, when you come away from reading 2 Corinthians you come away with a sense of encouragement. It's not only full of pressure, it's full of praise. Despite Paul's long list of hardships, this letter is one of the most optimistic books in the entire Bible. Yes, Paul honestly describes his pressures and problems; but there's no defeat here, no 'woe-is-me'. He's realistic about his problems, but resilient in his praise; and the overall theme of the book is one of triumph and thanksgiving.

In fact, the very first word in the body of the book is the word Praise. And the very first paragraph of the body of the book gives us five incredible ways of turning pressure points into praise points. It's a totally new and revolutionary approach to pressure. It's a way of dealing with stress that, if it could be bottled, would be every pharmacist's dream and every physician's remedy.

We can't always escape the pressure, but there is a way of converting it into praise; and when we do we discover the reverse truth of pressure—that it's the force that transforms lumps of coal into acres of diamonds. We move from pressure to prayer to promises to praise.

Now, let me show you exactly that pattern in the first paragraph of 2 Corinthians. Near the end of this paragraph, Paul wrote: We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressures, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.

There are three critical words there—hardships, pressures, and despair. And everywhere we turn today, people are under great pressure. Some of you are under so much pressure today that it's beyond your ability to endure it. In this passage, the apostle Paul says, in effect, I've been under great pressure, facing many hardships, but look at all the blessings and the benefits that have come from this pressure! Look at the way the paragraph begins, look at the very first word—Praise!

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ....

This is the most incredible perspective on the subject of pressure I've ever seen. He is saying, in effect, "Praise God for pressure!"

This entire book of 2 Corinthians details the pressures and problems of Paul's life, but his first word is praise!

In this paragraph, the Bible gives us five reasons to praise God for pressure.

Pressure Leads to God's Comfort (vv. 3-4)

He begins by saying, "Praise God because pressure leads to God's comfort." Verses 3-4 say: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles....

Paul knew how to nestle in the Lord's presence during difficult days and draw from the vast storehouses of His compassion and comfort. Let me give you a simple, little illustration of this from my own experience. A couple of years ago, I woke up in the middle of the night with a fear running through my mind that I might contract cancer. I had talked to several people who were battling cancer, and I guess it had seeped into my unconscious mind and I dreamed about it. I woke up troubled, but I reached for my Bible and my reading for the day was in 1 Peter. I started reading the whole book out loud.

I came to chapter 3, and the first part of 1 Peter 3 is addressed to wives; but I read it anyway and I came to these words: This is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

Well, when I read those last five words, it was like a jolt of strong coffee to my spirit, as though those five words were all written in capital letters: DO NOT GIVE WAY TO FEAR. It was as though my name were there, and God was speaking those words just to me. The Lord was saying, "You can imagine all kinds of plagues and perils and you can live in constant fear if you want to, but that isn't the life of faith. That isn't the life of abiding in Christ. That isn't the life of abiding trust. Just rest yourself in Me and do not give way to fear. You might have cancer and you might not have cancer, but in any event, don't give way to fear."

Now, I wasn't facing a real crisis; it was just an imagined fear. But it's a very simple illustration that points to a larger pattern. As I look back over my life, my most precious times with my Bible have been those moments when I've been afraid, anxious, apprehensive, angry, or alarmed—but as I've studied His Word, God has given me just the verse or the promise or the truth I needed to comfort and to strengthen my spirit.

As a result, I understand a little of what Paul meant when he said: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.

Pressure Equips Us to Comfort Others (v. 4-5)

But the sentence goes on to give us another praise point for pressure—it equips us to comfort others. Look at verse 3 and 4 again: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

We recycle our comfort, our verses, our empathy, and our lessons from the Lord. The comfort of God flows into our lives like a cataract, and then it overflows into the lives of others. After you've been through something, you're better able to help others who are going through the same thing.

Over the Christmas holidays, I read in the newspaper about a man named Bill Daniel who pastors a church in Winston Salem, North Carolina. When he was twelve years old, his family was so destitute there was no way for them to have any presents under the tree. Bill's father had been injured in a car wreck, and the family was out of money and out of luck, as they say. But a local church stepped in and made sure that the family's needs were met and that there were presents for everyone that year. He said that his sister still has the little tea set that she was given, even though it's been almost fifty years.

Now every Christmas for the past fifteen years, Bill Daniels heads up two Christmas tree lots with the proceeds going to needy families. It's sponsored by his church, and it works with local organizations like Toys for Tots and the Salvation Army and the local school system. It's grueling work during the holidays. Running a tree lot requires long hours in sometimes bitterly cold weather, and it takes about 40 volunteers from the church. Bill himself makes repeated trips to Boone, North Carolina, to get the trees. But if he starts to grow weary of the work, he just remembers how he felt on that Christmas morning when, as a child, God had provided for his family through a loving church. He comforts others with the comfort he received many, many years ago when he was twelve years old. ("Everlasting: Church's Kindness Has Stayed with Local Pastor" by Monica Young in The Winston Salem Journal, December 14, 2006 (Misc: Dec 06).)

The Lord may not call us to write books about our experiences, but we can write notes and give counsel and find a hundred ways to comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. We're all wounded healers, and we never go through any experience or pain in life but what God can use that experience to equip us to help and strengthen others.

Pressure Produces Patient Endurance (v. 6)

The third reason we can praise God for pressure is because pressure helps produce a very important character quality in our lives—patient endurance or perseverance. Look at verse 6: If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

The Greek word here is *πομπή*, which can be translated patience, endurance, or perseverance. It occurs over 30 times in the Bible, and it seems to be at the very core of character. It's the ability to wait patiently for the Lord's timing, to keep going, to remain strong in the face of struggles, and to press on with God-given endurance. This is what God expects of us and that is really the crux and core of maturity.

Pressure Teaches Us to Rely on God Who Raises the Dead (v. 8-9)

The fourth reason we can praise God for pressure is because it teaches us to rely on God who raises the dead. Look at verses 8 and 9: We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

Troubles in life drive us to the Promises of God, and as we focus on the promises of God, our faith is strengthened. This is the basic pattern for Christian growth, and I don't know of any passage that states it better. We grow the strongest during the hardest times, and God allows problems to crowd into our lives that we might discover His promises, His power, His presence, and His peace. We come to the end of our store of resources, and we're shipwrecked on His grace and stranded on His omnipotence.

I like the word that the New International Versions uses here—the word *rely*. One old hymnist wrote:

But blessèd be the Lord
Who hearkens when I cry;
The Lord, my Strength, my Help, my Shield,
On Him will I rely.

Pressure Generates Prayer and Thanksgiving (vv. 10-11)

Finally, pressure generates prayer and thanksgiving in both our own hearts and in those of others. Look at verses 10 and 11: He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Nothing generates prayer like the problems we face, and nothing creates praise like the answers God gives.

Years ago I met a remarkable man named Dr. J. Edwin Orr who, as a young man, traveled around the world for Christ, not knowing where the next speaking engagement or the next dime would come from. He wrote a series of books about his nomadic ministry, and in them he recounts miracle after miracle of God's providing for him at the last moment, opening doors, making connections, supplying funds, and paving the way for him to bring revival to peoples of many nations.

On one occasion, however, the Lord seemed to fail him. Dr. Orr arrived in Spain, reaching Barcelona on a bright morning and boarding a train for Madrid. The price of the ticket was more than he had expected and, after traveling all night, he arrived in the Spanish capital with little money left. He had the names of a couple of Christian leaders in Madrid, but upon calling them found little encouragement and none of the usual offers for accommodation or ministry opportunities.

Evening came, and Orr had little money and no where to spend the night. At midnight, he went down to the Salon del Prada, a sort of half-boulevard and half-park. His diet that day had consisted of a penny-roll of bread washed down with some water from the fountain, and his position seemed desperate. Orr, however, decided to remain unconcerned and to sing hymns quietly to himself. Finally he lay down on a park bench and drifted off to sleep. During the night he awoke with a start. His wallet was gone, and he had been robbed of what little he still had. There was nothing to do about it except settle down again for sleep. But at 3 a.m., he again awoke with a start. He was surrounded by three thugs who wanted to pick the rest of his pockets.

"I felt a sudden cold anger sweep over me," said Orr, a smallish but peppery Irishman. "I shut my fist, meaning to smash the jaw of the ringleader—three-to-one or not." The thugs stepped back a pace, and Orr regained control of his temper. Slowly the men slunk off into the night, and Orr lay down again. This time, however, his spirits were crushed. "This is the limit," he thought. "Robbed of almost all that I had left."

He had no one to talk to, no friends. He was alone without money in a strange city, in a foreign culture, without money for bed or board, without any purpose for being there, cold, and surrounded by thugs who had robbed him.

But suddenly this thought flashed into his mind. He told himself, in effect, I have traveled around the world and all over Europe, in all the major cities, by land and by air, by day and by night, without provision or purse, and nothing like this has ever happened to be before. Instead of being alarmed at my condition, I should be grateful that despite all my peregrinations, nothing like this has ever happened to me until now. God has allowed this to happen to show me how wonderfully He has spared me and provided for me in the past."

A spirit of thanksgiving rose up in his heart, and he lay back down on his stone bench and slept until the morning sun rose in the eastern sky. He awoke and sang the old hymn, "Still, still with Thee when purple morning breaketh." It was Sunday morning, and he announced to himself, "The tide has turned." He found a few coins in a hidden pocket of his coat, and he managed to find a cheap room where he shaved, brushed himself, cleaned his shoes, had breakfast, and went out, looking for a church.

At the church service that morning, he introduced himself and one of the women there had read his books and knew him from his writings. He was invited to preach at the evening service, and he soon met friends and church leaders who opened the doors of their homes and churches to him, affording him a revival ministry during his stay in that city. (J. Edwin Orr, *This Promise is for You* (London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1935), pp. 79-84.)

What was the secret? He turned his problems into praise, and in so doing announced to himself that the tide had turned. Are you ready for the tide to turn in your life? It first of all has to turn in your own heart. By faith we trust in Him who died and rose again, we embrace His comfort, we share it with others, we persevere and rely on Him who raises the dead, and we know that He who has delivered us will continue to deliver us. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favors granted to us in answer to the prayers of many, and we can say:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him all creatures here below,
Praise Him above ye heavenly host,
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

2 Corinthians 3:7-18 Glow-in-the-Dark Christians

Have you ever been criticized? Hurt by the words of another? I don't know if you remember last year when a CNN reporter was covering President Bush as he made a speech, and during his speech she slipped into the bathroom and, while there, ran into a friend and chatted a few minutes. She didn't realize that her microphone was on and her words were coming across the air and being beamed into millions of homes. In what she thought was a private conversation, she made some remarks that were critical of her sister-in-law, and everyone heard them including, presumably, that sister-in-law. I think a lot of us wondered how the next family gathering went.

Nobody likes it when criticism comes or when we hear something that someone else has said about us; but I've found that if you stand really still for must a few moments, the criticism will go in one ear and out the other. It's often not a very good idea to try to defend yourself or answer your critics. It's amazing how much we can shrug off when we want to.

In the early 1970s, I was working with the Billy Graham team in Norfolk, and I was amazed at how critical some of the clergymen were towards Dr. Graham. In fact, there was one group of very conservative, fundamentalist preachers who took out full-page ads in the newspaper, and I still remember the banner at the top of the page: "The Bible or Billy."

I was alarmed about this, but when I went to the crusade office and discussed it with Dr. Graham's men, they just smiled and shrugged it off. They told me, "Dr. Graham has always had a policy of not responding to criticism. He says that if you wrestle with a

skunk, even if you win, you lose.”

As a rule, I've found that's good advice. Too often we get our feelings hurt, we let ourselves get upset, we take offense too easily, and we're too sensitive. We need to just shrug things off and go on without letting them affect us. I often think of Jesus, when he was criticized and rejected in Nazareth and they took Him to the brow of the hill to push Him off. But the Bible laconically says simply that passing through the midst of them, He went His way.

But occasionally there are times when you need to explain yourself to those who are criticizing you, and that's what 2 Corinthians is all about. Paul was extremely distressed by some of the things being said about him in the city of Corinth, because he was afraid the criticism would affect the way people felt about the Gospel and about Christ Himself. They weren't just criticizing him, but his message, his motives, and his methods. And so the book of 2 Corinthians is a very personal and autobiographical work in which Paul seeks to explain himself in the face of certain criticisms.

I said last week that Paul's great theme was: "Thank God for pressure." Well, today we're talking about the pressure of criticism. And one of the criticisms is that he was too assertive, too authoritative, and too bold. In the passage we're coming to today, Paul explains his boldness, why he is so open and honest and assertive in presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And in so doing, he tells us all how to be phosphorescent, glow-in-the-dark Christians. This is a rather difficult but a very wonderful passage, so I'd like to look at it as carefully and exegetically and biblically as we can in the limited time we have, so would you begin by reading with me 2 Corinthians 3:7-18

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

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

This is not an easy passage to figure out, and I've struggled with it quite a bit; but I think we can make it relatively simple; and when you get to the basic truth running through it, it's well worth the effort.

Paul's basic point here is that his message and his Savior is so glorious that he cannot help being bold. Being a Christian, he claims, is glorious! It is a glorious thing! It's a wonderful thing! It's the most glorious thing in the world. It's so glorious that our faces should be shining all the time, and our lives should be under continuous transformation from one degree of glory to another. The whole world may be veiled in darkness, but the Christian walks in the light of the glory of God and is being transformed from glory to glory by the Lord, the Holy Spirit. Our very lives glow in the dark, and because we have such hope we are very bold. That's his basic point as I understand it. He gets there in four stages of thought.

Our Message is Super-Glorious (2 Cor 3:7-11)

Stage one is: Our message is super-glorious. The Old Covenant (the Old Testament, the Mosaic Law) was glorious, but the New Covenant (the Gospel) is super-glorious.

As he wrote this, the apostle Paul had on his mind the story of Moses in Exodus 34. As you may recall, in that chapter Moses ascended onto Mount Sinai into the very presence of the Lord to receive instructions for the newly-liberated Hebrews slaves who had just escaped the tyranny of Egypt and were on their way to the Promised Land. Moses ascended into the very glory-clouds of God's splendor, and when he came down from the mountain his face glowed. It was as though someone had turned on a powerful light bulb just under his skin, and the original languages even indicate that beams were shooting out of his face. The Israelites were so distracted and alarmed by this that Moses covered his face with a veil until the phosphorescence faded.

Now, here is what the apostle Paul is saying. Moses received the Law, which was given to show us the character and the standards of God's holiness. The Ten Commandments summarized the righteous requirements that flow out of God's pure character. In so

doing, the Law defines sin. What is sin? It is the violating of God's Law; and all of us are sinners and so all of us are dying. The Law defines sins and sin results in death. That's the Old Covenant.

Jesus Christ, however, came to fulfill the Law and to shed His blood to forgive lawbreakers like us. The Holy Spirit takes the sacrifice of Christ and sets us free. That's the New Covenant.

Now, if the Old Covenant was so glorious that it caused Moses' face to shine, how much more glorious is the New Covenant. If the Law of God is wonderful in that it summarizes God's holy character and His expectations, how much more wonderful is it that Jesus Christ came to fulfill the Law and to pardon our sins and to give us life.

You see, that's Paul's clearly point in 2 Cor 3:7-11:

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

Our Message Makes Us Bold (2 Cor 3:12-13)

Now, in verse 12, Paul gets to his next point: Moses veiled his face, but we are very bold. The verse says: Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.

In this passage, he is saying, in effect: "Yes, when it comes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I am assertive and I am bold, and here's the reason why. I have a message that radiates with a glory that far surpasses the glory of the old message. My message of grace is greater than Moses' message of the Law. Moses had his message and it made his face glow, but he hid the radiance behind a veil. But I'm not hiding my message behind a veil. Since I have such a hope, I am very bold."

Look at verses 12ff. again: Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away.

This Message is Veiled to Some (2 Cor 3:14-17)

But now, there's a third stage to Paul's argument. He admits that this message which so thrills him with its super-glorious nature, is indeed veiled to those who do not believe. Look at verses 14ff. Referring to the Israelites, he said:

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

So Paul is saying that Moses had the message of the Law and it was glorious, but He veiled His face. Paul has the message of the Gospel, and it is more glorious, and he is bold in presenting it. But even as he presents it, some people, as it were, still have hearts and minds that are veiled and they cannot see the glory of the Gospel of Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can remove the veil and give them spiritual freedom and liberty. If you'll look down at the next chapter, verse 3, you see that he explains this a bit more:

And even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is in the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," 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.

Our Message is Perpetually Transforming (2 Cor 3:18)

But now he comes to the fourth stage of his argument. When we receive the message of the Gospel, the veil is lifted and we behold, absorb, and reflect God's glory in ever-increasing measure. Our message and our Master are perpetually transforming. The super-glory of the Gospel soaks into our lives and makes us phosphorescent, glow-in-the-dark people. This is verse 18, one of the richest and most wonderful verses in the entire Bible. This is a verse to memorize.

And we, who with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which

comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Now I want to correct one word in this verse from the NIV rendering, and that's the word reflect. This is a difficult verse to translate, and if you go from one translation to another you find that some versions say that we reflect the Lord's glory and others say that we behold the Lord's glory. For example, the New King James Version says:

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

What does it mean to behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord? I think it means that we turn our eyes upon Jesus and look full in His wonderful face. We keep our eyes on Him and contemplate Him and meditate on Him, because Jesus is the mirror image of God.

Years ago I read of a cathedral somewhere in Europe that had a high and lofty and beautiful ceiling. But the room was so narrow and the ceiling was so exalted that it was difficult to gaze upon. So the rectors placed a large mirror on the floor, tilted at the proper angle, and by gazing into the mirror they could see the ceiling.

And that's what Christ is. Our God is so holy and infinite and awesome and invisible and high and exalted and lifted up that we can't very well take in His glory. But Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Look down again at chapter 4, verse 4: The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Christ is the perfect reflection of God Himself, but positioned so that we can gaze upon Him. John 1:18 says: No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known.

Colossians 1 says: He is the image of the invisible God.

Hebrews 1 says: The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being.

So we are to behold Jesus, and as we do so the Holy Spirit performs in our hearts a perpetual work of sanctification, making us more and more like Christ, transforming us from glory to glory. When we get to heaven, we'll be perfectly glorified; but until then we are works in progress. This verse is the essence of what we call sanctification, Christian growth and maturity. We increasingly absorb and reflect the glory of God, and it should show up even on our faces.

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

How do we behold the face of Christ?

First, we receive Him as our Lord and Savior. This is a good moment for me to remind you of the basic tenets of the Gospel. I read just this week about a man in Huntsville, Alabama who was imprisoned as a member of the Mexican Mafia. His name is Mauricio Cardenas, and he was co-founder of the Texas chapter of the Mexican Mafia. One day in his prison cell a newspaper arrived, and on the front page somehow there was a quotation from the Bible, from Mark 5:26, about the story of the woman whom Jesus healed. Somehow that verse grabbed his heart and mind, and by the end of the day he had prayed to receive Jesus as His Lord and Savior. But he feared letting his fellow gang members know about his conversion, because there was a policy that no one ever left the mafia except by death. It was a policy known as "Blood in, Blood out." So he kept his conversion secret, but finally he couldn't keep quiet anymore. He went to the recreation yard where there were about forty members of the gang and he told them in plain simple Spanish, "I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior, and I am backing out of the Eme (Mafia). I've thought it over long and hard and know the consequences of this action. You guys do what you have to do. It was an honor to have served as your leader. Now, it is an honor to serve Christ."

No one said a thing, but as the months passed no one hurt him. In fact others joined him, sparking a prison revival that so far has yielded 97 professions of faith and 10 baptisms. ("Former Mexican Mafia General Baptized in Texas Prison," by John Hall in Texas Baptist Communications, at <http://www.baptiststandard.com/postnuke/index.php?module=htmlpages&func=display&pid=5615>, accessed on December 5, 2006.)

There's nothing that changes our lives like having an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that He offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin, that through Him we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. We come to Him in repentance and

faith, and that makes all the difference in our lives. Perhaps that's your greatest need today.

Second, we read about Him in His Word and we read thoughtfully and slowly and with contemplation. This is a very important spiritual discipline which has become a lost art today. In the Latin church in times past this was called *lectio divina* (pronounced *lex'-ee-o / dih-vee-nah*), or reading divine, or sacred reading. It was the idea that we take a portion of Scripture or some wonderfully deep devotional book and we read it slowly, thinking about each word, mulling it over, and letting it soak into our hearts, letting it speak to us.

Third, we trust Him and when the difficult moments in life come, we visualize His face and keep our eyes focused on Him, trusting Him and rejoicing in Him in all circumstances.

Fourth, we pray and come into His presence frequently.

Fifth, we memorize verses like 2 Corinthians 3:18 so we can carry these truths with us all the time.

Sixth, we ask the Holy Spirit to take these spiritual disciplines and use them to transform us into the very image of Christ so that we become reflectors of His glory, and then we make up our minds to bear His image day by day.

I'd like to end with a story I came across years ago, but I've not told it for a long time. It has to do with a dashing knight who longed to rescue his princess, imprisoned by a cruel enemy in the palace tower. He devised a plan and recruited two small friends to send her a message. First there was Claude Caterpillar who was a hard-working fellow, but crusty and sour. He started inching his way up the wall toward the distant window, but it was hard work. He grumbled that the sun was hot, causing him to sweat. Then the sun withdrew behind a cloud, it started to rain, and he complained even louder about the raindrops. Finally he heaved himself onto the window ledge, looked at the fair maiden, and said, "Hey you, come over here. Are you the lady in distress?" She nodded. Claude gave her the once-over and said, "You're kidding. You mean I climbed all this way up here for the likes of you? Well, anyway the knight says to get ready, he's coming for you at 5 p.m. sharp. Think you can remember that, or should I repeat it?" And off he went.

Next the knight sent Barney Butterfly. Barney, too, battled the rain and the contrary winds. He almost made it to the window when a bird came by and nearly ate him alive. But finally, he fluttered in, landing softly on the lady's finger. "Lovely and favored maiden," he said, "the white knight loves you dearly, and tonight he is coming to rescue you. He asks only that you be ready at 5 p.m."

The princess smiled and replied, "Thank you very much, Mr. Butterfly. You are very sweet and I will be ready tonight when he comes. Claude Caterpillar already brought me the message, but tell me, why was he so disagreeable? He brought me the same news, but after he left, I felt worse than before he came."

The butterfly replied, "Oh, you mean Claude? Well, don't mind Claude. That's just the way he is. I used to be that way, too, until I was transformed."

Have you been transformed? Are you being perpetually transformed by the interior work of the Holy Spirit as you behold as in a mirror the very image of God in the face of Jesus Christ? Are you a glow-in-the-dark Christian? Spiritually phosphorescent?

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

2 Corinthians 4:7 Jars of Clay

But 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, NIV).

I read about a man whose route to work every day took him through a particular park in the city, and every day he saw an old fellow sitting on the park bench. This fellow was an illegal bookie, but the businessman didn't know that. The old fellow always looked forlorn, and the businessman thought he was homeless. One day en route to work, the businessman felt a surge of compassion for the fellow and as he passed by he handed him an envelope containing ten dollars and a note saying "Never Despair." The next as he passed by the old man handed the businessman an envelope containing sixty dollars. The old codger explained: "Never Despair

was in the money paying six to one in the second race.”

Well, we always win when we make up our minds to Never Despair. That was Paul’s attitude. He rode that horse in every race, and it never failed him. And it’s a message that we still need in life and in our labor for the Lord.

We’ve been noticing recently how much despair certain celebrities have. It’s really very sad. We’ve followed the tragic sagas of Anna Nicole Smith and Britney Spears. This week Rosie O’Donnell announced that she’s battling depression. This week the rock star Van Halen checked himself in rehab to deal his demons. This week, a star of the television program “Prison Break” has been arrested for manslaughter because of a fatal car wreck that was alcohol related.

I think we should all just thank the Lord we’re not celebrities. But even us ordinary mortals face a lot of problems and pressures in life. That’s one of the reasons the Lord gave us the book of 2 Corinthians. This is, in essence, a 13-chapter memoir on living with stress and pressure from a Christian point of view. It’s the most autobiographical of Paul’s writings. And throughout this book are wonderful insights on dealing with a stressful life. One of the richest chapters in 2 Corinthians is this chapter 4, and the heart of the chapter is verse 7, and I want us to see this powerful little verse and to study it in its context:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

There are three words in this verse that I’d like for you to circle, and three attitudes that I’d like for you to jot down along side of them. I’d like to give you the outline up front, so that we’ll have a framework for filling in the details.

- Ø The first word is treasure, and therefore we should be happy.
- Ø The second word is clay, and therefore we should be humble.
- Ø The third word is power, and therefore we should be hopeful.

Treasure: We Should Be Happy

Let’s start with that first word, treasure. This verse begins: But we have this treasure.... Let’s condense that down: We have this treasure.... We can condense it a little more: We have treasure.

Now underline that! We have treasure. We possess something very valuable. We are wealthy people. The Greek word that Paul used here for treasure is *θησαυρός*. We get our English word thesaurus from this word as a direct transliteration. A thesaurus is a treasury of words. Well, the actual Greek term originally meant a place for storing valuables, and it came to refer to the valuables themselves. In the New Testament, Matthew uses this word more than anyone else. After all, Matthew was a tax collector, and he seems to have looked at things through the grid of a treasury.

For example, turn to Matthew 13, which we call the Parables of the Kingdom. In this chapter, Jesus gave a series of analogies regarding the Kingdom of Heaven. And in Matthew 13:44, He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a *θησαυρός*, a treasure that a man found in a field. When the man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”

In biblical times when there were no banks, people would often bury their treasures. Sometimes they would forget where they buried them, perhaps because of old age or dementia, or they would die and no one would know about them.

Fred Prouty, our TDF member, on the staff of the Tennessee Historical Commission, and told me about a man just south of Murfreesboro during the Civil War who had a large amount of money—most of it in gold coins. It was the family fortune. When the Union forces drove into the area in 1862, he was afraid they would take his money. Of course, the banks were not good. But the man’s property was located on a main road between Murfreesboro and Shelbyville along a ridge and surrounded by large fields. So this man decided to bury his family fortune in a field across the road from his farm house, and he made careful mental notes as to the exact location of the buried treasure, using existing trees and creating some type of rock formation that he would easily recognize when he returned. This man was a staunch Confederate sympathizer and he fled the region for his own safety, and he wasn’t able to return home for a long time. Meanwhile, the Federal Army camped on this ridge and in this field, and the soldiers cut down the trees for firewood. They gathered up the rocks to form crude chimney bases for their barracks and for campfire pits.

Finally the troops moved off, the war ended, and the man returned; but much time had passed and everything was different and he was unable to locate the spot where he had buried his family fortune. He supposedly spent the remainder of his life trying to locate the lost coins.

Interestingly, there were newspaper reports in 1985 about a number of men with metal detectors finding gold coins, and it became a court case in which the judge ruled, in simple terms, “finders keepers.”

Well, this is the kind of story Jesus is telling here. A man plowing his field unearthed a box full of treasure, and he was incredibly excited. The word Jesus used to describe it was joy.

In fact, the textual experts tell us that the emphasis of the whole sentence is on the concept of joy. One commentary said that the words In his joy are placed in emphatic position in the Greek text, and many translations put it first in the clause in order to underline its importance in the verse.... "In his joy can be rendered as 'He became very, very happy and went ...' or 'Because he was so happy, he went and sold'" (Newman, B. M., & Stine, P. C. (1992). A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew. Originally published: A translator's handbook on the Gospel of Matthew, c1988. UBS helps for translators; UBS handbook series (435). New York: United Bible Societies.)

This is a picture of our lives when we discover Jesus Christ. When we discover Christ, we find great treasure, and we are excited with a joy that will never fade and an exuberance that will endure forever. That's the idea here in Matthew 13, and we can take these same themes back to 2 Corinthians 4 because Paul is using the same set of ideas.

When Paul uses the word treasure here in 2 Corinthians, he's talking about the treasure of knowing Christ and making Him known. When I was a college student, my school—Columbia International University—had as its slogan the words: "To Know Him and to Make Him Known." That's the essence of the Christian life. There is joy in knowing Jesus and joy in making Him known; and I think both ideas are interwoven into the context of this 2 Corinthians 4. Look at the way the chapter begins:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry...

That's the theme of this passage. Through God's mercy we not only have a Christian life, we have a Christian ministry. God in His mercy has given us a purpose to fulfill and a job to do.

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry we do not lose heart.

The implication Paul is making is this: "I may be tempted to lose heart; there might be times when I feel like giving up. But because God in His mercy has given me the treasure of knowing Christ and working for Him, I absolutely will not lose my morale or my enthusiasm or my commitment. I'm going to be upbeat, and I'm also going to be upright." Look at the next verse:

Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways. We do not use deception nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake.

The subject of this paragraph has to do with working for the Lord and sharing Christ. Paul is referring here not only to the treasure of knowing Christ, but to the privilege of making Him known. He continues in the next verse:

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

So verses 1-6 say, in summary, "We have preached and evangelized as plainly and honestly as we can. We have shared Christ. If anyone hasn't received our message, it's because the god of this age has blinded them, but God Himself is able to make the light shine and to give us the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ. This light has illumined my own life, and it's the greatest treasure I possess."

Think of it this way: Suppose you found yourself in a very large store in the middle of a very large city, and it was a lighting gallery, a store full of lights and lamps, everything from small nightlights plugged into the wall to fabulous crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. There were floor lamps and table lamps and reading lamps and accent lights and searchlights. Imagine you found yourself alone in this room at night, and it was pitch black. Groping from lamp to lamp, you feel for the switches and turn one lamp on after another, but none of them work. Some of them aren't plugged in. Some of them don't have bulbs. Some of them have bulbs that are burned out. But then you come to one, and as soon as you click the switch, the light flashes and illumines the room. By and by you come to another one. By and by another one. Here and there among the lamps are some that really work, that do what they were meant to do and burn brightly in a darkened room.

That's a picture of the Christian life and ministry. Christians are walking lights in a darkened world in which there are many lamps that are darkened by sin. Some of them have beautiful lampshades and some are gilded in gold and some are enormously expensive. But what good are they if they don't work? Most of humanity is walking around as midnight; but when Christ comes into our lives, the light comes on. Missionary E. Stanley Jones. He said, "When I met Christ, I felt that I had swallowed sunshine."

In this passage Paul uses this extended description of the Gospel. It is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. And he says it is a treasure. Read it again and see how it comes together:

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," 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... We have this treasure.

We know Christ and we have the privilege of making Him known—we have experienced the light of the glory of the Gospel of Christ, and we are reflecting that light to others—oh, the joy of it. There's no joy in all the world like it. We have treasure!

Clay: We Should be Humble

But now, the apostle adds a further point: But we have this treasure in jars of clay. Circle that word clay. I said earlier that in Bible times, when they didn't have banks or safe repositories, they would bury their precious possessions in the earth or hide them in caves. They would often use clay jars for doing this. Have you ever read about the Dead Sea Scrolls? These priceless manuscripts date back 2000 years and were discovered in caves near the ruins of the village of Qumran, in the desert South of Jerusalem. They were stored in clay jars. Of course, clay jars break easily. They are fragile. They are easily damaged. In fact, that's the way the scrolls were found. An Arab goat herder threw a rock toward the cliffs, trying to scare his goat back down the hill. The rock sailed through the opening of a cave, and the boy heard the sound of a jar breaking. The Dead Sea Scrolls were stored in jars of clay, but jars of clay are fragile. They break easily.

And Paul is using that as an illustration of you and me. We are God's depositories for His treasure, yet we are fragile and breakable and easily damaged.

Every one of us can identify with that. I don't need to spend much time on this point. No matter how strong we think we are or how stoic we try to be, we are fragile people and we break and are easily damaged. That's true of us physically and it's true of us emotionally.

Some of you right now feel like a jar of clay that's been chipped or cracked or broken. Someone has thrown a rock, and it's shattered something inside of you. Well, the benefit is that it keeps us humble. In fact, the rest of the verse makes this quite plain and that brings us to the third word—power.

Power: We Should Be Hopeful

The Lord could have made us vaults of steel or treasure chests of titanium, but He made us earthen vessels, and He did so for one reason: We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God.

The word all-surpassing is the Greek word the term from which we get our English term hyperbole. It means throwing beyond, excess, extraordinary amount, to an extreme degree.

The word power is that old classic term δύναμις, from which we get our English word dynamite. This word occurs over 100 times in the New Testament. Paul used this word many times in 1 and 2 Corinthians, for example:

Ø 1 Corinthians 1:18 – For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

Ø 1 Corinthians 1:24 – But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Ø 1 Corinthians 2:4 – My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

But in this verse he says that that since the all-surpassing power that fuels our lives is from an external source—from God Himself—we can be resilient in the face of discouragement. Look at what he goes on to say:

We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body.

It's God's power that keeps us going, and therefore nothing short of God can shut us down. If you're trying to live a Christian life and do a Christian work, there's no place for discouragement. We may be jars of clay, but we contain the treasure of Christ and His ministry, and His surpassing power is flowing through us.

Let me close with this old story. One day a farmer's donkey fell down into a well. The animal brayed and cried miserably for hours as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. There seemed no way to get the donkey out, and especially because the donkey was old and feeble anyway. So the farmer decided the best think to do would be to cover the old animal with dirt and just bury him.

The man invited his neighbors to come and help, and they all grabbed shovels and began to pitching dirt into the well. When the poor donkey realized what was happening, he squealed in fear; but shortly, to everyone's amazement, he quieted down. After awhile, the farmer peered down the well and was astonished at what he saw. With every shovel of dirt that hit his back, the donkey shook himself, the dirt fell to the ground, and the donkey took a step up. Pretty soon, to the amazement of all, the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well and trotted off!

Sometimes we feel like we're being buried alive. The devil shovels dirt on us, and this life does the same, and sometimes other people do the same. The trick is learning to shake it off and to take a step up. In this way, our problems become stepping-stones. We can do this because we aren't energized by anything less than God's all-surpassing power. And in the process, He will use us to change the lives of other people, whether we realize it or not.

We just do the work and trust Him with the results.

Johann Sebastian Bach was one of the greatest musicians of all time and his skills on the organ were without equal. Once when an acquaintance praised Back's rendition of a particular work, he replied like this. "There is nothing very wonderful about it," he said. "You have only to hit the right notes at the right moment and the instrument does all the rest." (Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers* (Nashville: Sparrow Press, 1992), p. 13.)

That reminds me of something Martin Luther once said: "I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word... otherwise I did nothing... The Word did it all." (David L. Larson, *The Company of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), p. 155.)

Let's live for Christ and do what we can do for Him in every way. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has 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. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.... Therefore we do not lose heart!

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 Our Daily Strength

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.
2 Corinthians 4:16

I read recently about a man in Bucharest, Romania, who was severely beaten by an anti-Christian mob. When Good Friday came, he showed up at church still bearing his bruises and the marks of the beating. As he described what happened, he also described how he had decided to pray about the incident. He told his friends that while he could not in good conscience pray for an end to suffering, he had learned to pray this simple prayer: "Lord, give me the strength to go on."

Not long ago, I read an article by a man who had married the woman of his dreams, but one day the police showed up at his door with the heart-stopping news of her murder. It took a long time for him to begin working through his loss, but he had finally written the article on the subject of grief management that I was reading, and the title of the article was: "The Strength to Go On."

As I prepared this message, I read a newspaper article about a woman in Jackson, Tennessee, whose little baby had died from a rare disease. She has since become a counselor helping couples who face such losses, and she told the newspaper: "When it happens, you feel like you can't go on. But God gave me the strength to go on. I feel like God has given me that way to help other

people live with it. That's kind of my mission — to help other people go on, to deal with the loss.”

All of us come to a point in life when we aren't sure we have the strength to go on. But the Bible has very many passages for us when we feel that way. The words strong, strength, and strengthened occur over 500 times in the Bible; and today I'd like to show you a wonderful passage that talks about the strength we need to go on—our daily strength. It's found in the book of 2 Corinthians, which is the most autobiographical of all Paul's writings. In 2 Corinthians he describes his hardships and heartaches in detail, telling us about his whippings and beatings and fatigue and rejection. But overall, the book doesn't have a gloom-and-doom feel to it; it's a triumphant book. And in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, we find the secret as we come to another of the Bible's great day-by-day passages:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

There are four dimensions here to finding the strength to go on, whatever our circumstances in life.

The Onward Dimension

First, notice the onward dimension of Paul's everyday life. Verse 16 begins—Therefore we do not lose heart. The word therefore connects this paragraph with the preceding one where Paul is talking about how he is cast down but unconquered. Notice verses 8ff: We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...”

Paul's life is beset by struggles and suffering on every side, but he has made up his mind that he wasn't going to lose his joy, his enthusiasm, his exuberance, his victory, or his morale. In verse 1, he declares: Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart.

And here in verse 16, in today's text, he repeats himself: Therefore we do not lose heart.

This is a very powerful phrase—we do not lose heart. Paul may lose sleep, but he isn't going to lose heart. He may lose friends, but he's not going to lose heart. He might lose earthly fame and prestige, worldly wealth and comfort; he may even lose skin off his back and years off his life, but he is determined not to lose heart. As long as he has the promises of God in the Bible and the indwelling Spirit in his heart, he is not about to lose heart.

The Greek word Paul used means to lose motivation, to become weary and to become discouraged and to give up. He is saying, No matter how hard things may be I am not going to lose my motivation, fall into discouragement, lose heart, and give up.

This is pure, dogged determination, and this is commended in the Bible.

1 Samuel 17:31 says, “Don't give up hope.”

2 Chronicles 15:7: “But as for you, be strong and do not give up, for your work shall be rewarded.”

Psalms 143:3 says, “When I am ready to give up, He knows what I should do.”

Acts 18:9 says: “Do not be afraid, but keep on speaking and do not give up.”

Romans 12:11 says, in one translation, “Never give up. Eagerly follow the Holy Spirit and serve the Lord.”

2 Corinthians 4:7 says in a modern translation: “Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up”

Hebrews 12:2-3 says: Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for Him, He thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and He is now seated at the right-hand side of God's throne. Think of what He went through; how He put up with so much hatred from sinners! So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up.

In Luke 18:1, Jesus said, “Always pray and not give up.”

Perhaps you're facing some hardships in life right now and you feel like giving up; but one the greatest secrets to the prevailing life is the refusal to give up or to give in. The greatest leaders in human history and in the world of sports and athletics have all had one thing in common—they refused to give up even when things were grim.

Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, the famous American war hero, once explained his victories and successes by saying: My mother, a very poor woman in Columbus, Ohio, taught her kids to pray, to read the Bible, to follow Jesus Christ and never to give up.

Alabama coach Bear Bryant said: Don't give up at halftime. Concentrate on winning the second half.

Michael Jordan said: If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.

Golfer Tony Lema said: If I had to cram all my tournament experience into one sentence, I would say, "Don't give up and don't let up!"

That may be sports talk but that's also Pauline theology. The apostle Paul said, "Therefore we don't lose heart. We don't give up and we don't let up. We don't allow adversity to neutralize our calling. We press on." That's the attitude we've got to adopt if we're going to finish our course having kept the faith.

The Outward Dimension

That's the onward dimension, but there is also an outward dimension. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing.... In other words, physically we aren't getting any younger, and sooner or later we're going to start to deteriorate.

Paul had accepted that because he understood that in Christ we have eternal life, and a little temporary wear-and-tear on the body isn't as big a deal as it seems.

He accepted the fact that he was growing older and that his body was frailer and sometimes failing; but it wasn't getting him down.

One of my favorite writers was a New Zealander named J. Oswald Sanders. He died at age ninety just as he finished his last book, which was on the subject of aging. In the introduction of that book he makes a very interesting point. He says that it is possible to be realistic about aging without being pessimistic and depressed. He said: Realism and optimism with regard to the aging process can sleep in the same bed." (J. Oswald Sanders, *Enjoying Your Best Years: Staying Young While Growing Older* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1993), p. viii.)

I know this is true based on my observations through the years. I knew a lady some years ago who was very aware of the fact that she was growing older, and her emotions and thoughts were dominated by the problems that come with aging. When you asked her, "Well, Sarah, how are you today?" you'd get a long litany of complaints, sadly rehearsed and impatiently borne.

But I had a different set of models growing up. My parents had me when they were a little older than most new parents, and I grew up with aging parents. My dad was forever making jokes about it. If he had an ache or pain, he'd just laugh it off with some flippant remark about getting older. They were forever joking about their old age pensions; and they even managed to keep their good humor when battling serious illnesses.

Once not long before she passed away, my mother said something interesting to me. "I went to see Dr. Allen for my regular checkup," she told me, "and do you know what he asked me? He asked me if I was ready to go."

"Go where?" I said.

"Well, you just need to be ready to go, because your heartbeat is very weak."

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"I told him that yes, I reckoned I was ready to go," said my mother, who didn't give me any indication she was too worried by the prospect. She may have been, but she didn't seem that way to me. She was too busy making homemade yeast rolls for her church's program of taking meals to the old folks.

So I think this is the attitude we're getting here from the apostle Paul. When it comes to aging, we have to be realistic, but we can either be realistic/pessimistic or we can be realistic/optimistic.

Paul was realistic/optimistic, and his secret is in the next phrase and in the next dimension of healthy living, the inward dimension.

The Inward Dimension

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.

I think this is the greatest secret of victorious Christian living, the art of daily renewal. Recently a friend shared with me the story of a church named St. George by the Vineyard which, according to Richard Wentz, is an old church in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains. It holds the title deed to a vineyard which produces, the natives insist, the most luscious grapes anywhere in the region. And every year, when those grapes are ripe, members of St. George's come to pick and eat the luscious clusters or to make a wine which is allegedly the best available anywhere. People often wondered about that vineyard because, from the outward perspective, nobody in particular ever took care of it. The old vineyard just was left alone to grow. Then old Jeremy, the sexton, died. His father before him had been sexton. His father's father before him, back and back for generations, had been the sextons of the church. No one could remember a time when the sexton of the church had not been a member of that family. A taciturn recluse, Jeremy did not talk much to anybody, but very lovingly cared for St. George's by the Vineyard. After his death, a note was found alongside his bed. It simply said, "The key to everything is under the altar." So the senior warden went to the altar and looked underneath, and there, surely enough, was a key, but not only a key, there was a stone slab which could be lifted up, and there were stairs leading down into the crypt. The warden and some of the other officials of the church took flashlights and began to investigate that dark cellar. To their surprise, they could hear the gurgling of a spring, and when they reached it, they discovered beside it a chart and a time schedule. Unknown to anybody else, the sexton had been releasing the waters of that spring regularly and faithfully into the ducts that irrigated the vineyard. Ah, that was the secret of its rich productivity, a spring that people did not know about, a secret source of renewal and vitality.

The Psalmist once said, "All my springs are in Him." When we come to the Lord day by day, under the altar, in full surrender, we tap into His refreshing flow, and we are daily renewed. Isaiah 27:2-3 says: I, the Lord, watch over (the vineyard); I water it continually.

Now the rest of the passage here in 2 Corinthians amplifies on this. Paul wrote: Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.

This is a profound sentence. He is using the analogy of a pair of scales. Inside of you and me, we have an emotional pair of scales. On one side is joy and on the other side is depression. On one side are our temporary problems and on the other side is our eternal glory. When we fail to renew ourselves each day, we tend to forget about the glory side of the scales and we focus on our afflictions, and they seem very heavy.

We talk about being heavy-hearted, about carrying a heavy load. When we don't daily renew ourselves, when we do not daily tend to the interior life, our hearts grow heavy and our burdens weigh us down. We lose our joy. We lose the light-heartedness in life.

But Paul is saying here in 2 Corinthians 4:17 that when we are being daily renewed in the inner man and when we are refreshing ourselves daily with the perspective of Scripture, we begin to see things more nearly as God does. And when we see things more nearly as God does, our afflictions in this world seem to weigh a lot less. In fact, they are light. They aren't heavy at all, they are light.

What kind of afflictions is Paul talking about? Well, he gives us a list of them in chapter 11: In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes save one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was ship-wrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep, in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes up me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

You and I have not experienced most of those afflictions, but we have our own list. But combine them all tighter, group them in one huge bundle, and throw them on the apostle Paul's back—and how does he describe them? They're light.

Because they are working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. The heavy, solid side of the scales is our eternal glory. Eternal life. Our eternal home. Our eternal rewards. Paul's going to go on and talk about that in chapter 5, but for now, he just wants us to look at our heartaches in the light of our eternal hope, and the ability to do that has a constantly renewing effect on our minds and hearts.

He says the very same thing in Romans 8:18: For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:17 are parallel verses teaching exactly the same thing from two different contexts.

And, of course, that leads to the last dimension Paul mentions—the upward dimension.

The Upward Dimension

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

We are inwardly renewed because we are upwardly focused. We see that which is invisible. What is Paul referring to?

Paul is thinking about our everlasting life. Let's read verse 18 again, then keep going, remembering that the chapter divisions were not in the original.

...while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

He's talking about our resurrection bodies, about our eternal life, about the New Jerusalem with its streets of gold and shining crystal river, which we looked at a few months ago. And he goes on in verse 9 to say, Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done....

Do you remember the story I told several months ago about a woman named Cheryl Wilson who was a missionary in Haiti. She literally died, but afterward she was almost miraculously resuscitated. In the half-hour between her apparent death and her resuscitation, she seemed to go to heaven and was so surrounded by the joy and beauty and presence of the Lord that she was bitterly disappointed when she was revived. She didn't want to return to this vale of tears, and for months afterward she was upset about it.

The Bible teaches us to keep our eyes focused on the hope set before us, centered on heaven, secured by the resurrection of Jesus Christ—the physical, bodily, literal, eternal home that awaits us as promised in the Word of God.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Found in Christ, I will not falter,
Faint, or fail to do His will.
Outwardly I'm growing weaker;
Inward, stronger still!
Day by day His Word renews me
With the Spirit's inner flow
As I look at things eternal,
Not at things below
Inward, outward, onward, upward
As I ask Him to impart
Daily strength and hope eternal
To my trusting heart

2 Corinthians 5:1-10 Tackling Life With Confidence

If you go down to your favorite bookstore today—somewhere like a good Borders or a large Barnes and Noble—you could shop around for a couple of hours and come home with a shopping bag containing these books, which are currently in print and available right now in most large bookstores:

- Ø Confidence: How Winning Streaks and Losing Streaks Begin and End
- Ø How To Develop Self-Confidence and Influence People
- Ø Ultimate Secrets of Total Self-Confidence
- Ø How To Have Confidence and Power in Dealing with People
- Ø The Confident Woman
- Ø Raising Confident Boys
- Ø Raising Confident Girls
- Ø Ten Days to More Confident Public Speaking
- Ø A Guide to Confident Living
- Ø 365 Ways to Raise Confident Kids
- Ø Be Confident
- Ø Six Secrets of a Confident Woman
- Ø What's Holding You Back: 30 Days to Having Courage and Confidence
- Ø The Confident Coach's Guide to Teaching Soccer
- Ø How to be Your Own Therapist: A Step-by-Step Guide to Building a Confident Life
- Ø Bombproof Your Horse: Teach Your Horse to Be Confident, Obedient, and Safe, No Matter What You Encounter

All of us want to tackle life with confidence—we want that for ourselves and for our children, our students, and even for our horses. Well, if you want to know the ultimate secrets to total self-confidence, then I've got a book in the Bible for you. It's this book we call 2 Corinthians, and this is the section of Scripture we've been studying in recent Sundays. One of the themes of this book is that we should live confidently even when we're under pressure. Paul uses the words confident and confidence twelve times in this little book. I believe the whole book of 2 Corinthians could be titled "Why I Am A Confident Person Despite Life's Pressures, by the Apostle Paul." In our studies through 2 Corinthians, we're coming to chapter 5; and notice these two verses:

- Ø 2 Cor 5:1: Now we know...
- Ø 2 Cor 5:6: Therefore we are always confident...
- Ø 2 Cor 5:8: We are confident, I say...

Here is a man who has been rejected, ridiculed, beaten down, battered, criticized and vilified. But his opponents were totally stymied when it came to shaking his confidence. He said, "I know, I am confident, I am always confident." Let's read the whole paragraph and see what this is about:

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 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.

Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

1. Confident People Think a Great Deal about Heaven (4:17-5:4)

This paragraph is easy to dissect, and when we do so we come away with three characteristics of confident people. First, confident people think a great deal about heaven. We think about the unseen world which will one day become visible. One of the troublesome things about this passage is the way the chapter division falls. Verse 1 is really the direct continuation of the previous paragraph, which, in our Bibles, is at the end of chapter 4:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is

seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

In this life we have momentary troubles, like little weights on one side of the scale. But we are heirs of eternal life in Christ with all that comes with that—the new heavens, the new earth, the new Jerusalem, the new order of things—and when you put that on the other side of the scale, there's no comparison. So we fix our eyes on what is unseen. Whenever we're tempted to lose heart, we think about heaven. Because we know that our bodies right now are merely tents that will collapse at some point, but we have an eternal house in the heavens, not made by human hands.

Let's study this out in detail.

Verse 1 says: Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed. This is referring to our human bodies right now. Paul is making a comparison, telling us that our bodies are like tents. I haven't gone camping in a long time, but I have a very nice tent that I bought years ago when our children were young, and this summer I hope to take it to the campground at RoanMountain and go camping with my granddaughters. It's a lot of fun staying in a tent—for a night or two. But for most of the year, I prefer my bedroom with my king sized bed, carpet under my feet, my bedside lamp, my temperature controls, and the adjacent bathroom.

Tents are temporary dwellings, and at some point we loosen the cords, pull up the stakes, collapse the tent, and pack it away. The Lord is using that as a picture of our human bodies. We are living right now in tents. It's a temporary dwelling place for our soul, because on this planet we are pilgrims and strangers. But one day this body will be resurrected by the power of God and will be glorified and eternalized—and compared to this earthly, dying body, my new body will be like a solid mansion.

And so now we groan, we get tired of living in a tent, we long for our heavenly dwelling. We think about heaven, and it gives us confidence about the future.

Let me read this extended passage in the Living Bible. You can follow along on the screen, because I think this is a fair interpretation of what Paul is saying, and these words are so glorious:

Though our bodies are dying, our inner strength in the Lord is growing every day. These troubles and sufferings of ours are, after all, quite small and won't last very long. Yet this short time of distress will result in God's richest blessing upon us forever and ever! So we do not look at what we can see right now, the troubles all around us, but we look forward to the joys of heaven which we have not yet seen. The troubles will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever. For we know that when this tent we live in is taken down—when we die and leave these bodies—we will have wonderful new bodies in heaven, homes that will be ours forever, made for us by God Himself, and not by human hands. How weary we grow of our present bodies. That is why we look forward eagerly to the day when we shall have heavenly bodies which we shall put on like new clothes. For we shall not be merely spirits without bodies. These earthly bodies make us groan and sigh, but we wouldn't like to think of dying and having no bodies at all. We want to slip into our new bodies so that these dying bodies will, as it were, be swallowed up by everlasting life.

Now, this inspires confidence for obvious reasons. When you for certain that something is going to end favorably, it inspires a natural confidence. When our children were little, one of our daughters was deathly afraid of going through the carwash down the street. I can understand why. You drive into a tunnel sort of contraption, stop your vehicle, and suddenly it's attacked by giant instruments while you're trapped inside of it. Intense blasts of pelting water strike the car from every side, creating a cacophony of confusion and sound. Strange rotating balls of spinning terror fall from above and begin battering the car. Monster-like devices reach out from the sides and spread their terror across the doors and windows. So I can understand why she was terrified and would scream bloody murder whenever we went through the carwash. But as for myself, I wasn't the least bit afraid to drive right into the lion's mouth, because I knew that three minutes and forty-five seconds later I'd be driving out again with a cleaner car. When we know that the ending of something is going to be favorable, it inspires natural confidence. So the first thing to remember is that confident people think a good deal about eternal life, heaven, and the weight of glory that shall be revealed.

2. Confident People Draw On Inner Resources (2 Cor 5:5)

Second, confident people draw on inner resources. Look at verse 5: 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.

In other words, it is God Himself who is preparing us for the experience of putting on immortality and experiencing eternal life; and as a down payment, guaranteeing what is to come, He has given us the inner resources of the Holy Spirit. This is a point that Paul makes several times in his writing.

For example, turn back in this same book of 2 Corinthians to chapter 1, verses 21 and 22: Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come.

Notice those words: He... put His Spirit in our hearts.

I don't have time to review everything the New Testament says about the inner working of the Holy Spirit, but let me just give you some thumbnails. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit enters into our hearts at the moment of conversion, He proceeds from the Father in accordance with the promise of the Son, and He goes to work, re-creating the attitudes and personality of Jesus Christ in and through our lives. He forms Christ within us. He edifies us. He sanctifies us. He bears within us the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He fills us with Himself and empowers us for service. He reproves and exhorts and helps us with our infirmities. He guides us into all truth and illumines us as we study the Scripture. He bestows spiritual gifts for ministry, and enables us to live in victory and to work with effectiveness.

If we fully appreciated the powerful indwelling presence of Jesus Himself within us by means of His Holy Spirit, don't you think we'd be confident people as we go through life? Someone once told Billy Graham something he never forgot—we need Jesus Christ for our eternal life and we need the Holy Spirit for our internal life. And in a book that he once wrote about the Holy Spirit, the great evangelist gave an illustration from his own life. He said that when he sailed for England in 1954 for a three-month crusade, he came under intense spiritual attack. A deep depression came over him, and a fear, and an incredible sense of inadequacy. He thought, in effect, "What are we doing! What have I gotten myself into? How could this possibly work? This crusade in England? We're sailing right toward an expensive and very public failure." He was panicky with a frightening sense of inadequacy. "Then one day," he wrote, "in a prayer meeting with my wife and colleagues, a break came. As I wept before the Lord, I was filled with deep assurance that power belonged to God and He was faithful. I had been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ when I was saved, but I believe God gave me a special anointing on the way to England. From that moment on I was confident that God the Holy Spirit was in control for the task of the 1954 Crusade in London. That proved true." (Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1978), p. 102.)

Notice what he said: "From that moment on I was confident." Confident people are those who know how to draw on the inner resources of the Holy Spirit, and you don't have to be a great evangelist to do that. It's true in our everyday lives. As we face challenges that would otherwise deflate us and defeat us, we go to the Lord in prayer and the Holy Spirit who lives within us provides the necessary power and grace and strength and confidence for whatever comes.

Notice again how Paul puts it here: 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. Therefore we are always confident....

3. Confident People Want to Please Christ (2 Cor 5:6-10)

And then he goes on to give us the third mark of confident people—confident people make it their desire to please Christ. Read on: Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Some time ago, I was driving to a speaking engagement and I became disoriented on the road and wondered if I was taking the right route. Nothing looked familiar and I wasn't certain my directions were clear. I didn't have very much time to spare, and I felt a sense of panic. Am I on the right road, or am I just driving around in circles. I tried to call someone on my cell phone for guidance, but couldn't get him. I tried to read my directions as I drove, but couldn't make heads or tails of them. This sense of frustration rose up inside me, and then, suddenly, I saw a familiar landmark and I knew I was all right. My confidence returned because I knew I was on the right road after all.

When our goal in life is to please the Lord, it inspires confidence because we know we're on the right road. And the great thing about pleasing Him is that we can do it on both sides of the grave. Notice what Paul says here: So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. As long as I'm alive on this earth, my goal is to please Jesus. When I die and go to heaven, I'll have exactly the same goal. For most people, their life's goals come to an end when they die. Maybe they've reached their goals and maybe they haven't, but it's all over with in any case because they have been snatched away in death. But for the Christian, we go right on with the same goal. It's our primary pursuit and purpose whether we're alive on earth or alive in heaven. We just want to please Him. And that inspires confidence in living because we know our objective, we know we're on the

right road, we know where we're heading, and we have a sense of purpose in life.

Proverbs 14:26 says: In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence.

Jeremiah 17:17 says: Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him.

Isaiah 32:17 says: The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever.

So many of us struggle with self-doubt, shyness, and a sense of inferiority. But the Bible says: If God be for us, who can be against us. In the closing moments of this message, I want to end this sermon with a sort of ordination service. I'm going to ordain each of you to preach. I want to empower all of you to preach a little sermon to yourself. I can't be around you twenty-four hours a day to preach to you all the time, and many of my sermons aren't what you need on any given day. I want to deputize you and I want to show you how to preach to the hardest congregation of all—yourself. Confident people preach to themselves from the truth of God's Word. They remind themselves of His promises. So here's your sermon:

I am full of confidence today because:

- Ø God the Father has a house for me in the heavens, not built by human hands.
- Ø God the Spirit lives within me as a divine deposit.
- Ø God the Son gives meaning to my life as I seek to please Him whether in life or death.

If the whole of the Trinity is, therefore, for me, who can be against me!

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am confident that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord

2 Corinthians 4:6-10 A Realist, an Optimist and an Activist Once Met

I read this week about some men I can identify with. They came to the psychiatrist and the first one said, "Doctor, you gotta help me. I think I'm a bridge." The doctor said, "Well, what's come over you?"

The second man said, "Doctor, I think I need help, too. I keep thinking I'm a curtain." The doctor replied, "Well, why don't you pull yourself together?"

The third man said, "Well, doctor, I think I'm a bell," to which the doctor said, "Take two aspirin, and if it doesn't help give me a ring."

Maybe we all feel like those men from time to time. We have so many pressures in life that if we can't pull ourselves together, we're going to end up ding-a-lings. Virtually every day of my life, someone talks with me, either in person or by e-mail, about deeply personal and troubling issues they are facing in life; and we all have those. Well, that's one of the reasons God gave us this book of 2 Corinthians, because here the great apostle Paul opened up and told us about the pressures that bore down on him and how he handled them. That has been our study for the last several weeks, and today we are coming to 2 Corinthians 6:4-10:

As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown, dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Paul crams a lot of material into these verses, and I have counted nearly forty different characteristics or attributes that he listed here to describe himself. What if I gave each of you a blank sheet of paper and we took about ten minutes to write out the forty terms that best describe us. What words or series of words best describes you? Well, in a sense that's what Paul is doing here, and he

divides his list into three categories. These categories provide a great deal of understanding into the way the Lord wants us to look at life, and from them we can extrapolate three great rules for dealing with pressure.

1. Be a Realist: Accept the Difficult (vv. 4-5)

First, verses 4 and 5 tell you and me to be a realist and to accept the difficult. Paul doesn't flinch from his problems. He begins by saying: As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way. In other words, Paul is still answering his critics in the Corinthian church, not so much because he wants to defend his own reputation, but because he wants his message and his Gospel to be respected and received. So he said here, "I want to demonstrate for you our integrity. In every way, I want to be commendable in your sight." And now, he goes on to tell us what he has borne and is bearing:

Ø In great endurance. This is a very important New Testament trait of Christians. The Greek word, *πομονή*, occurs 31 times in the New Testament. It means pressing on despite pressure and difficulty. What are you having to endure right now? Don't quit. Don't falter. Keep one foot in front of the other, and keep going. Persevere.

Ø In troubles. The word here is *θλ ψις*, which literally means pressure, especially pressure brought on by affliction and pain and suffering. This is very often translated "tribulation" in the New Testament, and this is the word Jesus used in Matthew 24 to describe the Great Tribulation. A day of Great Tribulation is soon coming on the world, but all of us face *θλ ψις* now.

Ø ...and distresses. The Greek word here literally meant "narrow places." We once had a house with a crawl space under the floor and once in a while I had to crawl under there for one thing or another. It's not easy, to crawl on your elbows and shins through dirt and cobwebs in a narrow place. That's the idea behind this word distresses. We find ourselves in the crawl spaces of life.

Ø In beatings, imprisonments and riots.... Here Paul was speaking literally of the beatings he endured at the hands of Jewish and Roman officials who pulled out their rods or their whips and applied pain to his body. There were times when he was roughly shoved into prison cells, and times when he was caught in riots and nearly pulled limb from limb. None of us knows when we're going to experience a time of physical pain or suffering or a time of great limitation or of criticism and unpopularity. But those times come in life, and we have to accept them.

Ø In hard work.... Sometimes our pressure comes from our workload.

Ø Sleepless nights.... Nothing is harder than losing periods of necessary sleep. The Apostle Paul wasn't always able to get his eight hours every night. Some nights he was traveling through the night. Other nights he was preaching until the midnight hour or even all the way through the night. Other nights he was counseling, or perhaps he was so burdened by the day that he couldn't rest at night. Sometimes he was caught in storms at sea or in cloudbursts on land. When we don't get our sleep, our bodies labor under the weariness of the flesh and our emotions become much more difficult to control. The apostle Paul experienced all this, too.

Ø And hunger. Paul traveled on a shoestring, and there were some days when he didn't have adequate food. Most people go through times in life when we have trouble meeting the basic necessities of our lives. We are needy people, and sometimes our greatest life-pressures come from unmet needs within us.

So life is very hard. This was brought home to me recently when Katrina and I read a book on the lives of America's first ladies, beginning with Martha Washington. I didn't know very much about the wives of the presidents, and as I read the accounts of their experiences, I was overwhelmed with the tragedy and difficulty and sadness and hardship that many of them faced. I'll just give you one example. Franklin Pierce was the fifteenth President of the United States. His wife, Jane, had grown up in a wealthy New England textile family, and her father was a college president and Congregationalist minister who, from all reports, was rather severe and morbid. Jane was the third child in the family, and she grew up without much self-confidence, and she suffered from anxiety, bronchial problems, and tuberculosis.

She met Franklin Pierce when he was a member of the United States House of Representatives from New Hampshire, and he was a very heavy drinker who bordered on alcoholism. The two of them dated for eight years, but Jane was so frustrated by the political attacks on Franklin that she came to utterly despise politics and wanted nothing to do with it. She married him, but seldom traveled with him to Washington, preferring to stay in New Hampshire.

In 1836, they had a little boy, but he died within days. Franklin was elected to the United States Senate, but Jane was so unhappy that he resigned and moved to Concord and opened a law practice. Except for Franklin's drinking, things calmed down. Then they had another child, but he died with typhus at the age of four.

They had another child named Benjamin, and Jane tried her very best to protect him because she didn't think she could endure another loss. But meanwhile, unknown to her, Franklin was planning to run for President of the United States. He told her nothing about it, deceived her about it, and when she finally learned of his presidential bid she fainted. When he won the election, she had no choice but to move to Washington. As the family traveled by train through New England, somehow the train jumped the tracks and right in front of her own eyes, eleven-year-old Benjamin's head was torn off by flying debris.

The damage to Jane's emotional equilibrium was enormous. Her three sons were all dead, one right in front of her eyes. Her husband had deceived her. And now she was suddenly in the unwanted role of America's First Lady as the nation was hurtling toward Civil War.

She turned the White House into a living tomb, covered with black bunting. She dressed in black, turned all hosting duties over to an aunt, and sat upstairs alone in deep depression writing letters to her dead son asking his forgiveness and awaiting for her presidential husband to come in from his drinking forays. She became known as the "Shadow of the White House." Franklin Pierce only served one term in office, and shortly after they left the presidency, she died of tuberculosis.

This story just illustrates that everyone in the world, no matter how powerful or well-known, faces incredible hardships in life. I once heard of a father who told his daughter, "I tried to provide a great childhood for you, but in the process I didn't let you know how hard life is. It would have been easier for you know if you had known earlier that life is hard."

Paul didn't flinch from life's hardships. He was a realist. We have to be realists and accept the fact that life is hard. Jesus Himself said, "In this world you will have tribulation."

2. Be an Optimist: Accentuate the Positive (vv. 6-7)

But thank goodness the passage doesn't end there. The next two verses (verses 6 and 7) tell you and me to be an optimist and accentuate the positive. Look at verses 6 and 7. Paul continues listing the attributes of his life and ministry, but the tone suddenly changes: In purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left.

Now, if you are just reading this without a lot of thought, you might not realize what an enormous change of tone occurs in these two verses. But think of it in this way. Go to the prison, the hospital, the funeral home, or just about anywhere else in this world, and ask people, "Tell me about the stresses and pressures in your life." You'll probably get a list of problems, and the longer people talk the worse their problems will seem to be. When we begin reviewing our trials and tribulations, we tend to feel sorry for ourselves and very grateful for someone to listen to them. We just keep on in the same downward direction.

But the apostle Paul did a sudden about-face in verse 6 and started going positive on us. In verses 4 and 5, he is a realist, and in verses 6 and 7, he is an optimist. The two are not mutually exclusive. I believe that God wants us to be realists because we live in a real world with real problems; but He wants us to be optimists because we have all His promises and resources on which to base our lives.

So the apostle goes on to say:

...in purity. In other words, I may have problems on the outside, but thank God I'm a single man who has been in terrible places, yet the Lord has enabled me to maintain my personal purity.

...in understanding. I have an understanding of God's plan for my life and knowledge of Him and His Word.

...patience and kindness. These pressures haven't made me hard and bitter, but patient and kind. I'm not a patient man by nature, Paul might have told us. I'm not kind by nature. Look at the way I once persecuted the church. But these trials have had a salubrious effect on my personality.

...in the Holy Spirit. My life and ministry is lived in the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within me. The Holy Spirit indwells me as a deposit or down-payment guaranteeing the riches that await me in heaven.

...and in sincere love. I'm motivated by love just like a fire is kindled with wood or a car is fueled by gasoline. The love of Christ compels me.

... in truthful speech. When I open my mouth, I'm confident of the truthfulness of what I'm saying. I have the truth and the facts on

my side.

...and in the power of God. I know that my results will count for eternity because I'm not depending on the power of my oratory or of my personality; this work is being done by God Himself through my puny efforts.

...with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left. The pressures I feel are largely external ones, but I'm striking back with spiritual weapons—the Word of God, the Gospel of God, the Power of God, the Spirit of God, and all the resources of heaven itself. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

In these verses, Paul is a great biblical example of what is sometimes called “positive thinking.” A lot of what purports to be positive thinking, even by Christian writers or preachers, is shallow thinking because it isn't based on sound and clear biblical theology. But there is foundation in the Bible for optimism, cheerfulness, and maintaining a positive attitude—and Paul is demonstrating that here.

Last year, I had a wonderful conversation with a man named Michael Guido, who is a pioneer radio and television evangelist who lives in Metter, Georgia. He was 91 years old at the time of our interview, and I couldn't believe what an exuberant attitude he had. He sounded like a teenager, telling me about his life and ministry, and how God had blessed him and was still using him. He told me about a Muslim girl from Damascus who had recently awakened him with a phone call at 2:30 a.m., Georgia time. She had heard one of his broadcasts and had become a Christian. He said that she called him for seven nights in a row at 2:30 a.m. to thank him for helping her find Christ. He said that he had learned the secret of turning scars into stars and of letting things make us better instead of bitter. I was so impressed with his youthful and positive attitude. After awhile, I asked him, “Dr. Guido, have you always been so enthusiastic? Were you born with this attitude or is it something you've learned and developed over time.”

“Oh,” he said, “I think it's been cultivated. I work hard on it.”

I believe that's the key. Maybe some people are born with a natural optimism; but most of us have to cultivate it and work hard on it. But what a blessing to those around you and what an asset it is in our personal lives and ministries—to be an optimist and accentuate the positive.

3. Be an Activist: Accomplish the Impossible (vv. 8-10)

In the last triad of his list in verses 8-10, the apostle tells us to be activists and to accomplish the impossible. Here he launches into a series of paradoxes that mark the Christian life. He gives us nine statements about the paradoxical or conflicting nature of our lives.

(We commend ourselves)... through glory and dishonor. In effect, Paul is saying: I'm dealing with the most glorious truths of the universe, and I'm a representative of the glory of Christ and I'm headed to glory; but sometimes I'm treated ignobly, and I face insults and dishonor.

...bad report and good report. Some people commend my work, but others just say bad things against me.

We are genuine, yet regarded as imposters. The Greek here becomes very terse, and our English translators have added some words to make a series of separate sentences. But literally, Paul is saying, “...as impostors, yet true.”

Known, yet regarded as unknown. People may know my name, but they really know very little about my heart, my motives, or even my message. My name is known around the empire, yet most people have a misconception about me and sometimes I feel lonely.

Dying, and yet we live on. I'm never quite sure I'm going to survive another day, yet I'm sure I'm going to live forever. What a paradox!

Beaten, yet not killed. They can slow me down but they can't keep me down.

Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. I've got reasons to feel sorrowful, but I've got better reasons to rejoice.

Poor, yet making many rich. I don't own a home, and I don't have a horse to ride or a wagon to carry my suitcase. Yet I'm in the business of making others rich beyond belief by introducing them to the riches of Jesus Christ and His abundant life. In a couple of chapters, Paul is going to say something similar about Christ: Though He was rich yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich. What was true for Christ was true for the servant. Paul said, “I certainly don't have much

money; but my message is giving the infinite riches of eternity to vast numbers of people.”

Having nothing, yet possessing everything. I don't have a house to live in or a bed to sleep in, but the whole world is mine along with all of eternity.

These are the paradoxes of the Christian life, and it's quite perplexing to those who don't know the Lord. One of the things that frustrates the world is their inability to figure out Christians. They don't know what to do with us. It's like the man long ago who was hauled before the emperor. “If you don't give up your faith,” threatened the emperor, “I'll throw you in prison.”

“That's all right,” said the man. “Then I'll have a whole new audience there for my message.”

“I'll kill you,” said the emperor. But the man said, “You can't possibly kill me, because I have eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

“I'll have you tortured,” said the emperor, to which the man replied, “Then I'll be following in the steps of my Lord, for He, too, was tortured, and in the process He redeemed the whole world.”

“I'll drag you through the streets as a slave,” said the emperor, to which the Christian replied, “I glory in shame, and besides, I'm already a slave to Christ.”

The emperor said, “I'll feed you to the lions or burn you in the flames.” But the man replied, “The lions can't eat my soul. And as for the flames, well, you threaten me with flames that will burn for only a moment, but you are in danger of the flames of eternal hell.”

Finally the emperor just shook his head and released the Christian. “What do you do with a man like that?” he said.

Jesus said that when we're born of the Spirit we're as mysterious as the wind. No one can tell where we came from or where we're going; there's a mystery about us that is incomprehensible to the world. So we are activists, changing the world one person at a time, spreading the message of Christ, and doing the impossible through His strength and energy.

In closing, I'd like to read you something that was written over a hundred years ago by a man named John Culpepper. It was entitled, “Why I Like Holiness People,” and by “Holiness People,” he meant Christians who were sold out and excited about their faith. In this little article, Culpepper describes what it is about Christians that intrigues him. He wrote, in part:

Why I like Holiness People: I like their aim. They aim high. If they miss, nevertheless, they have scored one good point. They are uncompromising. They are against sin and wrong. They are agitators. They make and distribute tracts. They circulate books.

They have a catching degree of spirituality. They are in for everything that is good. They say “amen” out loud. They shout as I feel. They [root] for a fellow as he's preaching.

If a load is heavy, they jump out and push.

Wherever you meet one, he is already organized and ready for work. If they are scared they pray and shout, and work and move, so that it can't be detected.

They always want to dig deeper, climb higher and know and do more.

They are long-winded in the closet, and nearly out of breath in a testimony service. Every one of them will pray if you call on them, and if the fuse seems damp, they will pray, call or no call.

They are God's globe-trotters. They don't ask how many are the enemy, but where are they.

They can shout in the cemetery. They actually use the Bible in their work. They will go to China or Africa as cheerfully as to the market.

It is not a money question with them. They know the Holy Spirit. They love you hard. Their experience throws up a highway I'd like to die on. They've come to stay.

They are unpopular with dirt, dignity and the devil. They are not in ruts.

They cry and run as if they had jumped the fox. That makes me spur on in the chase. Whenever I meet or hear one of them, it makes me want to quit something, or do something, or go somewhere, or be somebody. They are my kinsfolk.

Do some of those items describe you and me?

Don't be afraid to be a realist. Accept hardship, because life is hard. Don't fail to be an optimist. Accentuate the positive, because we have all the promises of God at our disposal. Don't be afraid to be an activist. Do the impossible, and live in such a way that your very example makes others want to quit something, or do something, or go somewhere, or be somebody

2 Corinthians 5:17 Evidence of Changed Lives

In our study of Christian evidences, tonight I'd like to present the case for Christianity in very practical terms. In other words, there is a pragmatic test. There is a great question: Does it work? If Christianity is true, don't you think it ought to make a difference in the lives of those who profess it? Don't you think it should make bad people good, and good people better? The great apologist, Bernard Ramm, said: Christianity "must not only provide us with the materials of a great philosophy, a great theology. It must have a relevancy or tangency to human experience."

This is the presentation of the Gospel that most influences people. They may not engage us in philosophical debates or theological discussions. But Peter said that they'll see our joy, and when they see the hope within us, they'll ask a reason. And we should always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us. It's one of our greatest weapons, one of the greatest apologetics.

I heard one man put it like this: If your car broke down late at night in a rough neighborhood and you saw a dozen rough and rugged men approaching you, would it make any difference to you if there were just coming out of a Bible study?

I'd like to discuss this in three phases.

The Justification Change

First, there is a change that takes place at justification, when we turn our lives over to Jesus Christ. "If any man be in Christ," says 2 Corinthians 5:17, "he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come."

Several years ago, I was speaking in San Francisco. My host took me out for lunch from the airport, and he pulled out an old photo. "Do you know this man?" he asked. The man in the photo was an old, ragged, dirty, flea-bitten man. "No," I said. "He doesn't look familiar to me." "That's me," said the man, smiling. "That's my 'before' picture. That's what I was like before I met Christ."

Have you noticed that whenever the apostle Paul wanted to demonstrate the power of God as exercised through the Gospel, he simply gave his own testimony? He told what he had done for him. He was the first century's greatest opponent of the Christian faith. Saul of Tarsus spearheaded the persecution against the early church, determined to extinguish the flame of Christ before it could spread. He later told King Agrippa his story:

The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They had known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as Pharisee. I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul, what do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.... Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:4-18).

How can you explain the fact that the greatest destroyer of Christianity became its greatest defender? How can you explain

his metamorphosis, as he gladly endured a lifetime of shame, suffering, and the executioner's sword to spread the faith he had once labored to despoil?

The mind of Saul of Tarsus was brilliant. His training was superb. His passion was unquenchable. His background and heritage flowed with the Jewish blood of a hundred generations. Yet in one moment he was transformed from the greatest enemy the early church ever faced into the greatest missionary the world has ever known.

What power could so change a life? The Gospel! And the Gospel's chain of witnesses from the days of Saul of Tarsus to our own is unbroken, and it grows stronger still. We could tell stories from every generation of the Christian era. But I would like to skip from Paul's day to our own times, looking at stories of people whose lives have been transformed by the sheer force of Jesus Christ through nothing more than their eyes falling upon the powerful pages of Scripture. Perhaps the purest testimonies are of those who are changed—not by persuasive personalities or spell-binding oratory or magnetic appeals—but by merely reading the Word of God itself, finding in it the voltage and veracity necessary to meet the deepest needs of their lives.

Some time ago, I read a remarkable story about a man named is Gary Fossen.

Gary grew up with an outwardly happy childhood, playing Little League ball, camping, fishing with his family. They lived in the suburbs and had everything money could buy. But under Gary's skin, the blood ran dark and devious. During his college years, he took a shotgun and killed the only three people who had ever loved him: his parents and sister.

He was arrested, convicted, and sent to prison. He felt no remorse and described himself as an animal. One day a clergyman came to his prison and started talking about Jesus Christ. Gary cursed him and told him that if he got any closer to the bars that separated them, he would kill him. To his surprise, the preacher kept returning. But Gary only cursed him at every opportunity. One day the minister gave Gary a small Gideon New Testament. Gary took the book, spat on it, threw it on the floor, and kicked it across the room and under his bunk.

Sometime later, Gary Fossen grew unbelievably lonely and decided to kill himself. A former paramedic in a nearby cell told him how to cut himself with razor blades so that he would bleed freely and die quickly. They smuggled in a razor, and Gary waited for the lights to go out. He thought about writing a suicide note, but he realized no one would be interested. He had no one to mourn his death.

Then he remembered the little book under his bunk. He thought perhaps he should at least read a verse of Scripture before killing himself. He turned to Romans and started reading chapter 6. He went on to Romans 7 and 8. He said, "I had never read the Bible before and the words started burning inside of me." He knelt by his bunk and began trying to pray. He asked God to show him how to be sorry because he still had no remorse. "That night, I saw a slow-motion movie of my life," he later said. "I saw every wicked thing I had ever done and I began to write them all down. The list went on for page and page and I wept over each one. I had not cried at all after the murders, but here I was in my cell crying."

That night forever changed Gary Fossen. "I was still in prison, but it didn't matter. That was the end of the pain and loneliness. I would never be alone again. I am still in prison, but I thank God for His Word that is so powerful that it cut into the deep calluses of my heart and seared through all the layers of hate."

Now, ask yourself—can Shakespeare have such an effect? Can Homer or Milton? Or, for that matter, can the writings of Darwin? No. Charles Darwin once wrote a letter to a Christian minister named J. W. Fegan who had conducted a preaching crusade in a village in England. As a result of Fegan's campaign, the alcoholics were converted and the bars closed down. Darwin wrote to Fegan saying, "We (the evolutionists) have never been able to reclaim a drunkard, but through your services I do not know that there is a drunkard left in the village."

The Sanctification Change

Now there is a second kind of change I'd like to mention, and that's the change brought about by sanctification, or by Christian growth. When we come to Christ our lives are changed. There's no doubt about that. But we are by no means perfect. And so here we come to church, and we're all forgiven but imperfect sinners. And so we become a forgiven but imperfect church.

One of the greatest excuses people use for not coming to church is that it's full of hypocrites. When someone says that to me, I say, "Yes, absolutely it is. Do you think Christians are perfect people? Don't you realize that in every congregation there are those of varying levels of maturity. We have some very mature Christians in our church, and we have some immature ones. We have some weak ones, and we have some strong ones. And all of us are—to some degree—hypocritical, because we don't always do what we know we should do. Every member of my church occasionally fails. And I'm the biggest hypocrite of all. I've studied the Bible all my life and I still fall short. Sometimes I'm selfish; sometimes I lose my temper; sometimes I think a wrong thought; sometimes I say an unkind word; sometimes I'm proud and difficult. I serve a perfect God and study a perfect Book, but I'm not a perfect person. There are areas in which I know to do better than I do. I'm a hypocrite. And if you're letting that excuse keep you out of church, then you'd just as well die and got to hell right now, because the church in this world is always going to be full of imperfect people."

But Christ is perfecting us. He is growing us. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

We had a man working for us at our house this week, and presently he said how he and his wife had prayed about something. I said, "So are you a Christian?"

He replied, "Oh, yes. I've been a Christian for a long time, but I had a lot of baggage I hadn't dealt with from high school. I'd held some things against some people and I had developed a hatred for some of my old buddies. I was a Christian, but I was a very bitter man. Then I went to the Billy Graham Crusade here in Nashville in 2000. I was even a counselor. But when the invitation was given, I realized that I needed to get serious about my own Christian life before I could help someone else. And I realized I had to forgive some people and deal with some bitterness, and I rededicated myself to Christ. And that has made all the difference."

The Glorification Difference

Finally there is the glorification difference. One day we will be perfect. Look at 2 Corinthians 5: "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 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."

This isn't an apologetic, of course. We can't use this as a defense of the faith, because it's something reserved for heaven; but it's part of the picture. When we are justified, we are saved from the penalty of sin. As we are being sanctified, we're being saved from the power of sin. When we are glorified, we will be saved from the very presence of sin. And this three-fold salvation makes us into different people, and that difference is a very powerful presentation of the Gospel.

There once was a powerful British preacher named Hugh Price Hughes. One day, the infidel and notorious freethinker, Charles Bradlaugh, challenged Hughes to a debate. Hughes accepted with a counterchallenge: "I'll bring one hundred whose lives have been changed by the Gospel; you bring one hundred whose lives have been changed through your testimony. Bradlaugh never showed up, and Hughes turned the occasion into a great testimony meeting.

Let me end with one question. When people look at your life, do they see the evidence of the transforming power of Christ? There's an old poem that says:

You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day,
By the deeds that you do, by the words that you say;
Men read what you write, whether faithless or true.
Say—what is the gospel according to you?

2 Corinthians 7:1 Since We Have These Promises

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Recently there have been a lot of newspaper reports about dog food that somehow became contaminated with rat poison, and as a result people across the United States unwittingly poisoned their pets when feeding them. The word contamination means that a poisonous element has crept into something that would otherwise be wholesome or healthy. It's a word we hear a lot in today's world.

We read about contaminated water, contaminated soil, contaminated lettuce, and contaminated beef. We worry about nuclear contamination, and about chemical and biological contamination. It's a word that means to become impure, corrupted, or infected by a dangerous or hazardous element, to become unfit for use by the introduction of unhealthy or undesirable elements.

This verse says that can happen to the human soul.

This is one of the strongest verses in the Bible on the subject of purity, holiness, and temptation. And the question in today sermon is – Has any impure or unhealthy element seeped into your body or spirit? Is there any contamination in your own life? Let's read the verse again: Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Biblical Background

You can tell immediately that even though this verse is the first verse of the chapter, it is the last verse of the paragraph. It's one of those times when the chapter division falls at a bad spot. The very first word of the verse – Since – links verse 1 with the preceding verses and shows that it is concluding the logical thought that flows from the end of chapter 6.

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Since we have what promises? Well, let's back up and survey the context. Paul begins in verse 14 says: Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. In context, Paul seems to be concerned about the Corinthian Church developing close and comfortable relationships with false teachers and false prophets. He's going to bring this up again later in the book, especially in chapters 10 and 11. So the context is talking about a church environment. Paul had brought the true Gospel to the city of Corinth, as we read about in Acts 18. He had come to this great city, preached Jesus, and established the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. He had nurtured the church like a father nurturing a child. He had written to them from the soundness of his own theology and from the love of his own heart. But during his absences, other so-called teachers had visited the church; and some in the congregation had rejected Paul's authority and were advocating these false apostles. Later in chapter 11 he's going to say that they are preaching another Jesus than the one he preached, and the church should not link up with or be yoked together in the same harness as these false teachers.

We're facing that in the church of Jesus Christ today. Let me read you just one article that appeared the other day in the newspaper.

Two leaders of The Falls Church, one of the largest Episcopal parishes in Virginia that voted to sever ties with the Episcopal Church, said they left the denomination because the American Episcopal Church "no longer believes in the historic, orthodox Christian faith common to all believers."

"The core issue in why we left is not women's leadership... It is not a 'leftward' drift in the church. It is not even primarily ethical -- though the ordination of a practicing homosexual as bishop was the flash point that showed how far the repudiation of Christian orthodoxy had gone."

"The core issue for us is theological: the intellectual integrity of faith in the modern world. It is thus a matter of faithfulness to the lordship of Jesus, whom we worship and follow," the pair wrote, noting that some leaders within the Episcopal Church "expressly deny the central articles of the faith."

"The 'sola scriptura' ('by the scriptures alone') doctrine of the Reformation church has been abandoned for the 'sola cultura' (by the culture alone) way of the modern church," they wrote. "(It has so destroyed) the credibility of faith that there is hardly anything left in their theology that is distinctively Christian."

So on the one hand we have the mainline Protestant movement in the United States that has been drifting from the integrity of the faith for a hundred years, and on the other hand you have scores of television preachers and evangelists, some of whom are propagating all kinds of strange doctrines. Well, the apostle Paul was acutely concerned about the purity and integrity of the doctrine of the church; and so he told them not to be yoked together with those who were preaching another Jesus. Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. We can only be yoked together with Him who said, "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me."

Now, to drive home his point, Paul asks five rhetorical questions.

- Ø For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?
- Ø What fellowship can light have with darkness?
- Ø What harmony is there between Christ and Belial (a lawless person, Satan)?
- Ø What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?
- Ø What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?

Then Paul makes this dramatic statement: For we are the temple of the living God.

In the Old Testament, God had set aside the Jewish people to be His chosen vessel for bringing the Messiah into the world. They became His channel of redemption, and therefore He had a special relationship with them. He gave them certain promises. He dwelled in their midst in the Temple and lived among them. Those Old Testament promises have application now to us as New Testament Christians. His Old Testament presence now dwells in His church. We are His temple. And now, Paul repeats four Old Testament promises and applies them to you and me. You can locate the promises here by the words: I Will. The Lord promises what He will do for His people.

For we are the temple of the living God. AS God has said: "I will live with them and walk with them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

"Therefore come out from them and be separate," says the Lord. Touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

- Ø I will live with you and walk with you.
- Ø I will be your God.
- Ø I will receive you.
- Ø I will be a Father to you.

Those were God's promises to His holy people, Israel, in the Old Testament, and they are His promises to us now. As Christians, we are His people. We are His temple. We are His set-apart ones. We represent His holy presence in this world, and we are heirs of these remarkable promises. He has promised to live with us and to walk among us. He is our God. He receives us and embraces us and He is a Father to us. Those Old Testament promises, according to 2 Corinthians 6, are available to be appropriated by you and me for ourselves. The Lord Himself is here in this room, walking among us, and when you leave here He will walk out to your car with you, drive home with you, go into your house with you, and live with you all this week. He surrounds His people He draws near. The unseen presence of the Lord Jesus Christ is the single greatest blessing in our lives.

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Since we have these promises and since the Lord Himself lives with us and walks among us and walks with us and is constantly at hand, make sure that you live a pure life. Make sure that your television viewing, your movies, your computer screens, your motivations, your love, your joy, your daily attitudes, your integrity are pure.

Now we live in a toxic world, and it's hard to keep our lives free from contamination. Some time ago, I spoke on the subject of pornography, and that's perhaps the most obvious illustration of that. If we really had an accurate number, how many people in this room logged onto internet pornography this very week? Was it two or three, or twenty, or fifty, or what? I have no way of knowing, but the statistics I read in the newspapers and journals is alarming. As I said a few weeks ago, surveys tell us that the average age in which a child is exposed to internet pornography is age eleven.

So in a world such as ours, how can we keep our minds and our lives and our homes pure? This verse gives us three ways to withstand the pressures of temptation.

Claim His Word

First, claim His Word and focus your life and your mental image on the promises and the presence of God in your life. The verse says, Since we have these promises..., indicating that the promises of God are a reason and a resource in withstanding temptation.

The most powerful tool we have in fighting personal contamination is the Word of God. I've advocated for years that all of us may be tempted in different ways by different things, but there are verses in the Bible to equip us to fight whatever temptation we're facing.

- Ø You can be contaminated by alcoholic and chemical and drug addiction; but one of the greatest weapons in fighting off this impurity is by memorizing and claiming Romans, chapter 6.
- Ø You can be contaminated by a love for money and by materialism; but you have 1 Timothy 6 to help you with that.
- Ø You can be contaminated by anxiety and depression; but you have Philippians 4 to help you deal with that.
- Ø You can be contaminated by laziness, boredom, loneliness; but there are verses in Romans 12 that can help you with that.
- Ø You can be contaminated by anger and bitterness; but not if you memorize and claim Ephesians 4.
- Ø You can be contaminated by sexual sin, but Ephesians 5 can be a big help to you.

The Bible says, "Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not (be contaminated by sin)." The devil has a very hard time doing

anything with someone who is regularly memorizing and meditating on the Word of God, particularly when that person has become aware of his or her points of weakness and has ferreted out specific verses that meet that need.

I think Paul is telling us something about himself here. This is a very autobiographical book, and we know that Paul himself faced temptation. He was a single man. He was exposed to all kinds of pressures. But he had some Old Testament verses memorized and those verses helped him withstand temptation. What verses do you think Paul claimed?

Let me show you two Old Testament verses that really helped the apostle Paul:

Ø One was Leviticus 26:12. It'd be interesting to know if there is a single person in this room who has ever memorized a verse from Leviticus to help in the struggle against some personal temptation; but Paul did. Leviticus 26:12 says: I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. Paul took that seriously. If God is going to walk beside me, and walk among me and my companions; if He is literally here, walking around me with His invisible presence, how can I just commit that sin right in front of Him? And this verse became a powerful detriment to personal sin.

Ø Let me show you another Old Testament verse that Paul depended on. Isaiah 52:11 says: Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure.... To Paul that was a very powerful command: Touch no unclean thing. When beset with temptation, I think he probably spoke this verse, perhaps out loud.

These were some of the verses, as you can see, that Paul listed here at the end of chapter 6. If they worked for him, they'll work for you, along with many other verses. God has put over 31,000 verses in this Book to help us withstand the temptations we face in life. It's like having 31,000 rounds of ammunition; and there's no excuse for having your arsenal empty.

Cleanse Your Life

Second, cleanse your life. You have to determine to remain pure in life. Look at the verse again: Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit....

He puts the onus on us to do it. The Greek verb that Paul uses here for purity is καθαρίζω, and it occurs 31 times in the Greek New Testament.

Ø When the leper said to Jesus, "Will you make me clean?" this was the word he used. It had to do with cleaning his skin from the loathsome corruption of leprosy.

Ø When Jesus told the Pharisees that they washed the outside of their bowls but the insides were filthy, this was the word He used. It was the term used for washing the dirt and filth off dishes and bowls.

Ø In the epistles, this word is used repeatedly to describe how God washes and cleanses us from sin.

But here's the interesting thing. Most of these passages talk about how God cleanses us, how we are cleansed by the blood of Christ, how we are washed by the water of the Word. But here in 2 Corinthians 7, the Bible says that we have a part in this; we have a responsibility. It says: Let us purify ourselves....

God has purified and cleansed us in terms of our eternal souls; but in terms of our daily habits, we have a responsibility to stay pure. We have to make the right choices. We have to have the right boundaries in our lives. We have to install the right disciplines, with His help.

Literally in the Greek, it says, Let us purify ourselves from every defilement... We have to tell ourselves that there are forbidden zones for us. When I was growing up, my Aunt Louise owned a factory in Bristol, Tennessee, that produced large metal pipes and fittings. It was a dangerous place with forklifts and electrical machinery and acid vats and huge pieces of metal flying through the air on cranes. Very often people would come for a tour of the plant, so she had a pathway drawn through the factory. There were two white parallel lines that defined the path, and as long as visitors stayed within those boundaries they were safe.

God's Word has drawn the moral boundaries for our lives, and sin occurs when we step outside of that pathway; but it is never necessary to do so. We have to reach within us, by the Spirit's help, and draw forth the discipline to live an uncontaminated life.

I have a daughter who lives in Louisville, and she works out regularly at the YMCA near her house. She told me last January how frustrated she was by all the "Resolutionists," as she calls them. There are people who make a New Year's Resolution to get back

into shape, and they flock to the YMCA and she has a harder time getting a parking spot and getting the treadmill she wants and so forth. "I'll be glad when the Resolutionists drop away," she said, "and things get back to normal."

Well, it takes more than a good intention to remain pure. You have to make a serious life commitment and stick with it.

Come of Age in Your Christian Walk

The third strategy in verse 1 is one of continued growth; come of age in your Christian walk and experience. The best way to overcome temptation in your life is just to keep growing stronger spiritually. Look at verse 1: Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

That last phrase means: Let us keep growing more and more perfect in our personal holiness out of reverence for our holy God. For example, pornography has always been around, but the difference is this: In the past you always had to search it out; and now it searches you out. It's very aggressive, showing up on your computer screens, on your portable electronics, on your television sets. You used to have to go out of your way to find pornography; now you have to go out of your way to avoid it. And it's highly addictive. It is contaminating our society, and it is contaminating the bodies and souls of many Christians.

I want to read to you a letter sent to me by a man in our church. I've edited the letter so as to make it appropriate for a Sunday service, but it isolates a critical issue that many people are facing in our churches and in our society.

I'm writing to you on the topic of pornography. It is something that is rarely talked about in church, at least openly, and I applaud your willingness to speak on it. It is something that is so prevalent in our society today. Many think they are above it and have never been tempted. That is where I believe you should start. We've all been tempted. Whether it is a catalog, a calendar, a commercial or a storefront, we have all been enticed by it. It is the driving force for almost every advertisement directed toward men: from shaving cream to car tires.

Some say that isn't pornography, but it is in its smallest state. Christ said it isn't about the physical act, but about the thought process. You linger too long on a cheerleader on TV, stand too long at the magazine rack on the store, think you're old enough to handle the R rated movie, or just look at the back of the calendars at the mall. You may not be immersed in online porn and paying for the shows, but you have been tempted to LUST.

Just this past week in order to send a message to a friend on MySpace, someone said they had to create their own account. Once done, they were inundated with ads with scantily clad females with captions like: "Is it naughty to be nice or is it nice to be naughty?" Their profile said they were a married male and a proud parent, but they still got the ads. Do you know how many teenage fellows have MySpace accounts? Do you know how many have been lured to online porn? It is just a click away.

Yes, I do struggle with porn. I have for nearly 30 years. My job requires computer use. Some days that's like asking an alcoholic to work in the liquor store. You have got to be prayed up every minute of every day. Your mind has to be on God and His faithfulness. And more importantly His Grace and His Mercy that are new every morning. Guilt can tear you down and send you into a downward spiral that takes weeks to get out of.

This is the battle many people are facing right now, but it's not the only one. Temptation comes to us in many guises and disguises. If you are caught in this or any other sin that is contaminating your body or soul, I want to ask you to claim the truths of this passage of Scripture. Search out and claim the promises of God. Make up your mind to purify your lifestyle and your personal habits from any sin that can contaminate (or is contaminating) your body and soul, and perfect holiness out of fear of God. Do it with the help of Jesus Christ whom you love and who loves you.

Claim His Word. Cleanse Your Life. Come of age in your Christian experience. And...

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?

For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

"Therefore come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God

2 Corinthians 7:5-7 The Power of an Encouraging Church

Today I'd like to begin a new series of Sunday morning messages entitled Healthy Choice Healthy Church, /from the last half of the book of 2 Corinthians. Exegetically this is a continuation of the study through 2 Corinthians that we began before Easter, but in this last half of the book the Apostle Paul gives us a series of pictures and descriptions of what it takes to be a genuinely healthy church—and that's something we all need.

Over the Christmas holidays last year I heard a story about a couple who many years ago gave birth to a son. They had a hard time choosing a name for him. Finally there in the hospital room, they named him "Odd." As he listened to the discussion, the doctor who delivered the baby had to leave the room so he could snicker. The nurses could hardly take care of the little baby because of giggling about his name. When Odd began going to school, all his classmates teased him because of his name, and it was the same in junior high and senior high. In college, Odd was always having to explain why his name was, well, Odd. He was the butt of jokes and the source of ridicule. Somehow as time went by he managed to get married and establish a career, but the curse of his name followed him all his life. As an old man, he finally told his wife he wanted no more of it. "My name was been a torment to me all my life," he complained. "I'm so tired of it I can't stand it any more. I want you to promise me that when I die, you will not put my name on the gravestone. I at least want to be free from the curse of my name in death. Just put the date of my birth and the date of my death, and nothing more on my tombstone."

Well, by and by Odd did die, and his wife honored his request. On his gravestone she omitted his name altogether and just listed the date of his birth and the date of his death. And now people walk by his grave, look at that tombstone, and say... "Isn't that Odd?"

Well, we're all odd aren't we? My wife sometimes says, "Robert, I think everyone in the world is odd except you and me, and sometimes I think you are!" Every single one of us is a strange combination of good and bad, strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad points.

There's a sense in which we're all walking contradictions, because we often believe one thing and act exactly the opposite. In my case, for example, I'm a Bible teacher who deeply believes what the Bible says about the peace of God that passes all understanding. I believe that Jesus meant what He said in John 14:1: "Let not your heart be troubled." I believe the truth of Romans 8:28, that all things work together for good to those who love God. Yet I struggle with various anxiety disorders and sometimes the pressures of life upset me like an apple cart. That's a universal problem, for most of us struggle from time to time under the considerable load of life.

I find a great consolation in the book of 2 Corinthians, because here in this book—the most autobiographical parts of Paul's writing—he admits that the same was true for him. How odd that the man who wrote Philippians 4 about the peace of God and Romans 8 about the providence of God should write 2 Corinthians 7 about his own fears and phobias in life. Sometimes I almost think that the Apostle Paul, for all his spiritual stamina and maturity, suffered from anxiety disorders, too. I'd like to show you a passage of Scripture in our on-going studies through the book of 2 Corinthians. It's a short but very practical paragraph. Look at 2 Corinthians 7:5ff:

When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever (2 Corinthians 7:5-7).

This is one of the most personal and realistic and practical of all of the paragraphs in Paul's writings. As I studied this passage, I came away with three indelible truths.

1. Encouragement is One of Our Greatest Needs (v. 5)

First, we need comfort and encouragement; we have conflicts without and fears within. Verse 5 begins, "When we came into Macedonia...."

This is the second time in this letter that Paul refers to the problems he had in this region. Look back at chapter 2 as a reminder: Now when I went to Troas to preach the Gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia.

Paul had sent Titus, his trouble-shooter, to the church at Corinth to try to resolve the problems there. Corinth was Paul's premier church in Europe, one he had spent months and trying to establish; and it was in grave danger. There were divisions there. There were false teachers and heretical doctrines springing up. There was opposition to him there; and he had sent Titus to try to manage the situation; but he himself was apparently so worried about it that he couldn't even preach in Troas.

The literal Greek here is, "My spirit had no relaxing." Paul couldn't relax. The old Phillips translation says, "I was on edge the whole time."

It's terrible to feel that way. That's the way I feel when anxiety gets into my system. My nerves are on edge all the time. Winston Churchill once said that worry is an emotional spasm that occurs when the mind "catches hold of something and will not let it go." I often quote another old definition of worry that says that worry is a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained.

Well, not even the apostle Paul was immune from this; and here in Troas, Paul became so upset and worried that couldn't preach, so he went on to Macedonia (northern Greece). According to our text today in chapter 7, things got worse: When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest. He uses the same Greek word: (relaxing). In chapter 2, his mind could not relax; and in chapter 7, his body could not relax.

He continued, we were harassed at every turn. The Greek word for "harassed" means afflicted, pressured, pressed, made the object of hardship. Paul faced some very hard things in Macedonia; and then we have the very descriptive little phrase at the end of verse 5: conflicts on the outside, fears within. And the Greek word for fears is φόβος, from which we get our English word phobia.

In other words, Paul needed encouragement just like we do. We live in a world in which encouragement is one of our greatest needs.

Last year, I decided to study the life of artist Vincent Van Gogh, the remarkable Dutch painter who produced priceless masterpieces before gradually losing his mind and shooting himself when he was 37 years old. As a boy, Vincent wrote these words: "I feel instinctively that I am good for something, that there is some point to my existence... What could I be... What service could I perform?" (D. M. Field, *Van Gogh* (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 2005), p. 19.)

Growing up, he searched for purpose and meaning in life. As a young man, he moved to Paris and found an apartment in Montmartre, and there he became friends with a young Englishman with whom he began studying the Bible. He became very interested in the Lord and felt God was calling him into the ministry. He began working in a little church and occasionally taught the Bible and even gave the sermons. He read *Imitation of Christ* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and he wrote to his brother Theo with recommendations about studying the Bible. He wrote in one letter: "Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel; if I do not aim at that and possess faith and hope in Christ, it would be bad for me indeed... It is a delightful thought that in the future, wherever I go, I shall preach the Gospel." (Ibid., p. 35.)

Vincent, however, failed in his efforts to get into theological school. He was discouraged, but not willing to give up; and in 1879, he was assigned a temporary post preaching the Gospel in a poverty-stricken area among the miners of Belgium. It was hard work, and Vincent was an eccentric young man whose preaching wasn't always so very good. He had no one to encourage him, no one to mentor or disciple him, no one to comfort and strengthen him. The church authorities issued a report saying that while he wonderfully aided the sick and wounded, his ability to preach was lacking; and as a result he was dismissed. He packed his things, said goodbye to a few of the people, and plodded down the road in bare feet, head bent, carrying his few possessions on his shoulders, and the children shouted after him, "He's mad! He's mad!" Vincent gave up on the church, gave up on the ministry, turned away from the Lord, and decided to become an artist. Even there, he had no one to encourage him except his brother. During his entire lifetime, he reportedly sold only one painting. He became increasingly unstable and unhappy. During the final seventy days of his life he painted seventy paintings, some of them masterpieces. He was in a frenzy, losing touch with reality, until he finally borrowed a pistol and went out into a field and shot himself.

Badly wounded, he came back to his boarding house, and someone asked him what was wrong with him. He was walking oddly and holding his stomach. He said, "I am wounded." He went up to his room, and a friend came to check on him. Vincent said, "I

have shot myself. I only hope I haven't botched it." Shortly afterward, he died. Now even his worst and smallest works sell for millions of dollars, and his art is priceless.

There's something about Van Gogh's story that fascinates me. There's no doubt he was mentally ill and that his short life was marked by instability and irritation. He was very hard to live with. But I couldn't help wondering what would have happened in those early days of his ministry if he had just been given some encouragement. Certainly his brother Theo tried again and again to encourage him. Theo was devoted to Vincent. But in his preaching and in his ministry and in his desire to serve the Lord, Vincent received almost no encouragement at all, he had no mentor, and as a result he finally faltered and gave up.

I can't help thinking how different was my experience. As a teenager I would preach, and the messages, I'm sure, were very amateurish and awful. But my pastor's wife, Juanita Floyd, was a wonderful encourager. "Oh, honey, that was so good," she would say with great feeling. And it encouraged me to try another one. In my first pastorate, the people were so warm and receptive and attentive, and they encouraged me to keep trying.

But more young people fail for lack of encouragement than for any other thing. Our children need encouragement. They need comfort. In whatever it is they are doing, they are afraid of being inadequate, of failing, of letting others down, of being made fun of. And there is no power on this earth like someone who will come along side of them to encourage them. Someone once said, "More people fail for lack of encouragement than for any other single thing."

So even the apostle Paul faced conflicts without and fears within. Even he needed encouragement, as he said: When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within.

But—and here's the important thing—the book of 2 Corinthians does not stop with chapter 7, verse 5. The good news is that the passage goes on to verse 6, and there is this wonderful little phrase: "But God..."

2. Encouragement is One of God's Greatest Provisions (v. 6)

We have a great, divine cheerleader who is the God of all encouragement. I don't know if you've every thought about this or not, but these two words – but God – make up one of the greatest phrases in the Bible; and it occurs in some of our favorite passages. As you read some of these passages, you have the record of something terrible that happened, something depressing occurred, there was a problem, there was a heartbreak, But God intervened. But God had an answer. But God stepped into the picture. But God issued a promise. But God came.

Ø Joseph told his brothers in Egypt: You meant it for evil. BUT GOD intended it for good.

Ø The Psalmist said: My flesh and my heart may fail, BUT GOD is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Ø Peter said: You put Jesus to death, nailing Him to the cross, BUT GOD raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death.

Ø Romans 5 says: Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. BUT GOD demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

One of our biggest problems is that we're prone to reverse the clauses. We suffer from Reversed Clause Syndrome. We say, "God is great, but I have a terrible problem. God is good, but I have troubles." We should reverse the clauses and say, "I have a terrible problem, but God is great and He will lead me through it. I have troubles, But God is good and He will work it out for my benefit."

That's exactly what Paul did here. He said, For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. BUT GOD...

And he went on to describe God like this: But God who comforts the downcast... Underline those four words: God comforts the downcast. The word comfort is *παράκαλέω*, which is very similar to the word we have in John 16, when Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the *παράκλητος*, which is translated in some of our Bibles as the Comforter.

The prefix, *para*, means alongside or near. The stem word *keleo* means to call, to invite, to speak, or to beckon. When the two words come together, it presents the picture of someone who has come closely alongside another person for the sake of speaking to him, counseling him, comforting him, or assisting him with instruction, counsel, or advice. (Rick Renner, *Sparkling Gems from the Greek* (Tulsa, OK: Rick Renner, 2003), p. 464.)

We have a great picture of this in Luke 24 when the two disciples are on their way to Emmaus, and their spirits are downcast and depression is rolling over them like the tide. Luke says that Jesus suddenly overtook them and came alongside of them and began walking with them, and by the time they arrived in Emmaus, they were like new men in their hopes and attitudes and energy levels. That's the idea behind this word "comfort," and it says that God is the one who does this in our lives. It's one of His functions as our Friend and as our Father.

The consistent teaching of the Bible is that God Himself does this in the lives of His children. In the book of Genesis, the Lord came down to walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. In the case of Enoch, it says that he walked with God and was not, for God took him. The Psalmist said, "The nearness of my God is my good." Isaiah said, "Fear thou not, for I am with thee. Be not dismayed, for I am thy God. I will help thee; yea, I will comfort thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness." Jesus said, "Abide in Me, and I will abide in you." James said, "Draw near to God that He may draw near to You."

We're all occasionally downcast, but 2 Corinthians 7:6 says that God comforts the downcast. If you're downcast today, congratulations. You qualify!

But now, here's the question. Exactly how does God draw near to us and comfort us? How does He encourage us? I could answer that question in many ways.

Ø I could say, God comforts us by giving us certain promises in His Word that meet the particular need we're facing. How many times I've been weary, worn, and worried; and I go to the Word of God and find a specific promise or verse that has borne me up.

Ø I could say that God comforts us through the act of worship. Sometimes when I've been down in the dumps, I've just taken a long walk, looked up into the skies He has made, starting quietly singing the great hymns of the faith, and in the process of worshipping Him my heart has been helped.

Ø I could also say that God comforts us through answered prayer.

Ø I could also say that God encourages us through the workings of His Providence. Think of the book of Esther. The Jews were facing the terrors of total massacre, the end of the Jewish race, the destruction of their families, the slaughter of their children. But God in His providence turned aside the danger and brought together a set of circumstances that saved and advanced His people. And there was such great rejoicing that to this day those events are celebrated every year in the Jewish festival of Purim. Sometimes God does that for us. We get a clean bill of health from the doctor, we get an unexpected check to meet our financial needs, we get the promotion we had prayed about, the job opens that we had wanted. When we see the hand of God in the personal providential circumstances of our lives, we are encouraged.

Ø I could say that God encourages me through His presence. There have been times when I could feel the presence of God in an unusual way imparting strength to my heart.

God has many, many ways of coming alongside us to encourage us. But in this passage He did not come alongside Paul and encourage him with a verse of Scripture. He did not come alongside Paul and encourage Him with a hymn of worship. He did not come alongside Paul and encourage him with a twist of providence. He came alongside Paul and encouraged him through a fellow believer, through the arrival of Titus. Look at verses 5-6 again: For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.

God imparted His comfort through another human being who showed up with encouraging news. Titus and Paul finally caught up with one another, Titus had good news, and Paul was relieved and comforted—and He said that God comforted the downcast through the human agency of Titus.

Think of yourself today as a walking, breathing, fully commissioned divine dispenser of encouragement to others.

It's a fantastic thing to think about the fact that we are the provision of encouragement God wants to make in the life of another person. God could encourage that person directly through a verse of Scripture, or through a twist of providence, or through a supernatural revelation, or through an angelic visit, or through a hymn of praise. But the Lord wants to commission you as His special agent for shoring up the morale and attitudes of that other person. You are standing in God's stead in dispensing His encouragement.

Hebrews 10:25 says about the church: Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 3:13 says: But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today.

1 Thessalonians 5:11: Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

3. Encouragement Has a Never-Ending Pass-Along Quality (v. 7)

There's a final aspect to this that I'd like to mention today. Encouragement has a never-ending pass-along quality to it. Look at this passage again:

When we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

The Corinthians had, despite all their problems, somehow managed to encourage Titus, and Titus had passed the encouragement along to Paul, and Paul wrote it in this book for us and when I read it today I am greatly encouraged. In fact, last year during a period of personal discouragement I went to Chicago with 2 Corinthians under my arm, and it was like a massive double-dose of encouragement to me, and as a result, I have used this book to encourage others. There's a ripple effect to our simple acts of encouragement that goes on until the day when Christ shall return to this earth.

Ted Engstrom was the respected head of World Vision for many years and the author of a number of very helpful books. In one of them, *The Fine Art of Friendship*, he tells about a literary group that formed some years ago at the University of Wisconsin. It was made up of a group of gifted young men who wanted to be poets, novelists, essayists, and authors. They were all creative and gifted men with a ton of literary potential, and they met together regularly to read and critique each other's work. They called themselves the Strangers, and they tended to be rather hard on each other. They dissected the minutest literary expressions, and their sessions became critical and tough and demanding as they surveyed each other's work.

Well, there was a group of women of literary talent at the same university, and, not to be outdone, they formed a group as well, which they called the Wranglers. They, too, read their works to one another, but there was a great difference. Their criticism was much softer, more positive, more encouraging, and sometimes there was no criticism at all. Every effort, even the most feeble, was encouraged.

Twenty years passed, and an alumnus of the university was doing an exhaustive study of his classmate's careers when he noticed a vast difference in the literary accomplishments of the two groups. For all their bright and determined potential, not one of the young men in the Strangers had made a significant literary accomplishment of any kind. But from the Wranglers had come six or more successful authors, including Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings who wrote *The Yearling*. (Ted W. Engstrom, *The Fine Art of Friendship* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), pp. 131-132.)

It leaves us with the question: Are you a Strangler or a Wrangler?

We all need encouragement, and God is the God of all encouragement. He uses us to encourage one another, and those simple acts and words of encouragement have a ripple effect that outlive us all.

Wherefore, says the Bible, encourage one another with these words.

2 Corinthians 7:10 Church Discipline and Godly Sorrow

When my parents gave birth to a little boy 54 years ago and named him Robert John, they decided to take him to church, as I'm told, on the first Sunday of his life; and I've been in church ever since. The only time when I nearly got away from attending church was for a while during my first year of college when I lived in Bristol, Tennessee, Tennessee, with my invalid aunt, and for some of that

year I just stayed in on Sunday. But somehow, except for that time, I've always gone to church; and I've had five church homes during my lifetime. The first was in Elizabethton, the next two were in Columbia, South Carolina, South Carolina; the next was my first pastorate, and for the last 28 years I've been here. But I've visited hundreds of churches, I suppose, across the nation and around the world. I've discovered that some churches are toxic. They are just unhealthy places to be. I praise the Lord that I've never been a member of a church like that. All five of my home churches have been filled with people who loved the Lord and who loved each other.

But some churches are troubled; and you've seldom seen a more troubled church than the one in Corinth. This church was Paul's signature work in Europe, the European church that he established in Acts 18, staying there for a year and a half. He later visited the city several times and wrote at least four letters to them. It was desperately important to him that this church do well, for his sake, for the Gospel's sake, for the Lord's sake, and for their sake. But Corinth was a highly pagan city, and the church proved to be highly immature, troubled, divided, and difficult. It caused Paul endless pain, and when you read through 1 and 2 Corinthians, you get an idea as to how troubled he was because of the problems in the church.

The Importance of Church Discipline

It's not surprising, then, that the issue of church discipline comes up in both letters. But if you read these letters carefully, you come away with a very interesting perspective on church discipline.

We sometimes think of church discipline as being that action whereby the congregation votes to suspend someone's membership in the church, but that is not primarily what church discipline is. Church discipline is that process whereby Christians who are struggling or straying in their Christian faith can be admonished, encouraged, revived, and restored. That may on rare occasions result, in the final analysis, with someone's membership being withdrawn or in a public censure being given; but that is only on rare occasions.

Consider this, for example. In the book of 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul dealt with a long list of dirty laundry, as it were. Some in the Corinthian church were getting drunk on communion wine during the Lord's Supper. Some were causing divisions in the church. Some were teaching false doctrine regarding the resurrection. Some were leading worship in an inappropriate way. Some were carelessly practicing a distorted version of speaking in tongues.

In my book, those are pretty serious problems. You couldn't get drunk here if you wanted to during our communion services because we use unfermented grape juice, but what if we did use fermented wine and what if that was an ongoing problem here? What if the deacons or staff members staggered down the aisles inebriated as they passed out the elements of communion? What if we did have people teaching in our Life Groups whose theology about the resurrection was heretical? What if we had people standing up during the services and jabbering away in some esoteric language that no one understood, and doing so without the benefit of either love or wisdom? What if we had people deliberately causing divisions in our church?

Those things were all true for the Corinthians, and it was about to drive Paul to despair. And yet to my surprise, he did not direct any of them to be cast out of the church or dis-fellowshipped. Not one of them. He did not recommend that the church take public disciplinary action against any of these people I've mentioned. There was only one person in this whole troubled church whom Paul singled out for that procedure, and that was a man who was scandalizing the church before the whole city of Corinth by openly espousing and practicing a form of incestuous immorality that even the pagan Corinthians found reprehensible. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul wrote, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?"

In other words, there was a man in the Corinthian church who evidently was openly and boastfully engaged in immoral conduct with a woman who had married his father—either his mother or his stepmother; and even in the pagan and heathen streets of immoral Corinth, this was scandalous. It was a violation of Hebrew law from the Old Testament, but it was also a violation of Roman law and even of Corinthians mores, such as they were. It would be like someone in our church openly espousing a vile form of sexual immorality that even our American society, as liberal as it is, would find repulsive, and who did it openly and boastfully as a member of our congregation. The reputation of the entire church was at risk; and Paul said, "You have to take a public stand here because this is a public issue and the whole community knows about it. You have to put this man out of the church."

Sometimes it is necessary to do that, and we've done it a handful of times here in recent years, once or twice publicly and once or twice privately. But with all these other sinful people and sinful behaviors, Paul said, "Correct these problems. Work with these people. Admonish them. Teach and preach and counsel them. You don't want to tolerate sin, but you want to correct it in a way that encourages holiness among those involved. Exercise church discipline, not necessarily in the sense of casting people out of the

church but in the sense of doing those things that will most likely bring about repentance, healing, revival, and restoration.”

So I believe in exercising church discipline on a continual basis, but that discipline takes various forms. We preach and teach Scriptural principles for holy living, and the teaching and preaching of the Word is in itself a form of church discipline. Paul’s two letters to Corinth were disciplinary in nature. Some of my sermons are disciplinary in nature. These are more difficult to preach, but they are necessary. Some of our LifeGroup lessons are like that.

We also counsel and admonish people privately; we meet with people. I do this, the staff does this, and I know our deacons do this; and so do our Life Group leaders and other leaders in our church. And as members we admonish and counsel one another. Sometimes we set up accountability groups. Sometimes we move people out of places of leadership for a while. We have Divorce Recovery classes and Celebrate Recovery Groups. We try to establish an atmosphere where friendships and relationships can occur that involve reproof.

But here’s an important point. For rebuke and admonishment to be effective, it normally has to be done within a relationship of trust. The first time I realized this was many years ago when I attended a Bill Gothard Seminar, and Mr. Gothard devoted some time talking about how to administer a reproof when you find yourself in the uncomfortable situation of having to rebuke another person. That’s a task that none of us likes, especially someone like me who dislikes confrontation. But Gothard pointed out that if you’re going to come alongside someone and show them what’s wrong in their life and help them make a course-correction, you’d better have that person’s love and loyalty and confidence.

Proverbs 27:6 says, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”

The first part of that verse is the operative part as regards what we’re talking about: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted.” If you don’t have the context of trust or of a friendship, rebuking someone is usually taken as little more than criticism. None of us responds to that very well, and it seldom produces positive results. If someone I don’t know or don’t respect comes up to me and criticizes something about me or my family or my church, I usually bristle for a moment then shrug it off. But if my good friend or coworker or someone I trust or love comes to me and pulls me aside and says, “Robert, I’m a little concerned about something that you’ve said or something that you’ve done,” – then I listen. I may not like it at first, but I’m improved by it. Here in 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul was speaking as their beloved father, as the founder of the church and as the man who had poured his life into theirs. Within the context of this personal history, he was trying to correct some problems in this fellowship. We can say that the entirety of 1 and 2 Corinthians was an exercise in church discipline.

So church discipline is anything that brings about correction and improvement in the spiritual life of another, and it best occurs within the context of a church that is concerned about holiness and that is diligently committed to building mutually-supporting relationships. It occasionally takes a public form, but the vast majority of church discipline is done behind the scenes with a view toward restoring the person or people to spiritual and moral health and integrity.

Now, in the passage we’re studying today, Paul had made repeated attempts to correct some problems in the church at Corinth, and he finally felt that some of his efforts were beginning to bear fruit. Let’s look at this passage that begins with 2 Corinthians 7:8--

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us.

Two Kinds of Sorrow

Now here we have a very important distinction that almost no one in this world understands except the Christian who has been given insight from God. There are two kinds of repentance. Two kinds of regret. Two kinds of sorrow. There is worldly sorrow and there is godly sorrow. Let’s look at this as we continue in verse 10:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

Our world is filled with people who display worldly sorrow. In our pop culture, that usually involves checking into a rehab center. Now, I’m a great advocate of Christian rehab centers. If someone is struggling with a sinful addiction that has him or her by the throat, sometimes they need time sequestered in a therapeutic environment where they can receive sustained emotional, physical, and spiritual help. I thank God for these tools we have today.

But in our pop culture among the rich and famous, rehab centers have become a PR tool. A man tells a joke that offends gays, a

person goes crazy and cuts off their hair, someone makes a stupid remark that threatens his or her film career, and the next thing you know they're off to a rehab center where the press can't interview them and the story dies down.

But the question is: Are they genuinely repentant? Are they convicted by God over their sins? Are they willing to let Him change their character?

One day several years ago, I did a search in the Bible for the phrase "I have sinned," and I was astounded at what I found. Over and over again, there were characters in the Bible who uttered those words, but they didn't mean a thing.

Ø In the book of Exodus, Pharaoh was overwhelmed with the plagues that came upon him because of his hardened and sinful heart, and he cried out and said, "I have sinned" (Exodus 9:7 and 10:16). But he didn't really mean it.

Ø In the book of Numbers, the heretical prophet Balaam said, "I have sinned" (Numbers 22:34), but his repentance wasn't lasting.

Ø In the book of Joshua, Achan said, "I have sinned" (Joshua 7:20), but it was too late; he said it only because he was caught and it did not represent heartfelt repentance.

Ø In the book of 1 Samuel, King Saul said, "I have sinned," (1 Samuel 15:24), but it did not come from a humble heart. He was still speaking in defiance and pride.

Ø In the book of Matthew, Judas said, "I have sinned for I have betrayed innocent blood" (Matthew 27:4), but he didn't really repent.

I only found twice in the Bible where those words were uttered in absolute sincerity. Once was in 2 Samuel when King David was confronted by his friend, Nathan, over his immoral sin with Bathsheba. He said, "I have sinned," and he meant it and turned from his sin. The other time was in Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son who said, "I have sinned against heaven and in your sight."

Worldly sorrow is when we feel regret and/or remorse for our sins, but we don't really take it seriously enough to humble ourselves before God and with His help change our attitudes or behavior. You see, there are three levels to this thing.

Ø There is regret, which is mental. We realize we made a mistake or committed a sin, and our minds wish we had not done that, or at least that we had not been caught.

Ø There is remorse, which is emotional. We realize we made a mistake or committed a sin, and our minds wish we had not done it and our emotions feel pain because of it. That's where most people stop, and that's what Paul is calling "worldly sorrow." But it stops short of godly sorrow, because godly sorrow has a third element to it, which is repentance.

Ø Repentance, which is volitional. We realize we made a mistake or committed a sin, our minds wish we had not done it and our emotions feel pain. And our wills, our volitions, our choice is that we are going to change this attitude or behavior with God's help.

How do you know if you have worldly sorrow or godly sorrow over something in your life? Well, in the remaining part of this paragraph, Paul gives us a checklist. Look at verses 11ff:

See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

At least some people in the Corinthian church got it. They suddenly realized, "What idiots we've been! How foolish we've been! We've been wrong in our attitudes and in our actions and in our words, and we're going to change right now." And when we have that attitude, God helps us to change and that's the way we self-improve.

Here's How It Worked for One Man

Recently I read the story of a man who wanted to enter the ministry but who from his teenage years had battled the sin of sexual lust. He repeatedly prayed for forgiveness, but as time went by, he became increasingly enslaved to private sin; and after he was married, the problems persisted and threatened his marriage. He finally went to see a well-known minister and there he confessed his sin. The minister sympathized with him and prayed for him; but nothing seemed to help. There was no change in his life. A year

passed, and at length the man was so frustrated with himself that he scheduled a four-day fast to get away and deal with this problem before the Lord. One the fourth day, he finally experienced such a break-through in his spirit that he knew he had victory. Later he contemplated why he had gained no help a year before when he had visited the minister and confessed his sin, but now he had victory.

He later wrote, “My initial sorrow was after a worldly manner. I wanted to be free because I thought if I didn’t get rid of this sin, God wouldn’t promote me from the ministry of helps into a preaching ministry. I was more concerned about the consequences of this sin and how it would affect my ministry than the fact I was sinning against God. Yet, a year later my sorrow had changed, and now my motive was not fear of consequences on my ministry, but that I loved God and wanted nothing between us. Godly sorrow produced life-yielding repentance which led to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10).”

He added, “‘Salvation’ in that verse is from the Greek word *sozo* which from Strong’s Greek dictionary is defined: ‘healing, preservation, wholeness, soundness, and deliverance.’ So my godly sorrow produced repentance, which granted deliverance.” (John Bevere, *The Voice of one Crying* (Apopka: Messenger Press, 1993), pp. 86-87.)

I think that’s a great point. True repentance is when we want to change a behavior in our lives, not just because of some benefit we’ll receive ourselves, but because we know that behavior is displeasing to the Savior who loves us and who gave His life for us, and because we know that it detracts from His glory.

As I prepared this message, I had a visit from a young man, 25-years-old, who met me for lunch. He reminded me of a sermon I had preached about a year ago in which I had challenged a group of students to find and form accountability partners. This idea had rolled around in his heart, and finally, with some trepidation, he approached another fellow whom he respected and asked him if he would be interested in forming such a partnership; and the other young man had said yes.

“So we got together,” my friend told me, “and as we talked I was able to open up and tell him about personal and private things that no one else has ever known. For twenty-five years I’ve been shouldering the burden for all my sins and recovery, hiding it from everyone and trying to deal with it by myself. He, likewise, opened up and confessed things to me that he had never talked about before. We agreed to meet each week and hold one another accountable, and we’ve also committed ourselves to Scripture memory.”

He said, “It has been the most life-changing and liberating thing I’ve ever done. There was something about confessing and repenting of my sins alongside someone I trusted and getting these things into the open and being held accountable for them that has changed my life. I was converted to Christ as a young man and I’ve been saved all these years; but somehow I feel almost like I’ve been saved all over again.”

You see, that is church discipline—growth and correction and holiness that takes place quietly within the context of supportive relationships. That is godly sorrow, when we seriously repent of sin in our lives in a way that brings repentance and leads to deliverance.

See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

Paul continued: So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. By all this we are encouraged.

Is there something in your life that needs to be confessed to God and perhaps to a trusted friend? Take it seriously. Are you living in bondage to some sin or bad habit? Repent with godly sorrow. Don’t keep limping along tolerating that rock in your shoe. Stop long enough to pull off your shoe and get rid of that rock once and for all. For worldly sorrow brings death, but godly sorrow leads to repentance and brings forth life.

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their abilities. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving (2 Corinthians 8:1-7).

Back in the 1980s, there was a man named Tom Peters who was asked by his consulting firm to do some research into successful organizations and businesses. He was given an almost unlimited expense account, and he traveled first class around the world interviewing important people who headed up large corporations and who wrote about leadership and management. At the end of his research, he put together a two-day presentation with 700 slides, and he was asked to present it to the leadership of PepsiCo, which was headed by a man named Andy Pearson. But Tom Peters knew something about Andy Pearson, and he knew that Andy wouldn't have the patience to endure a 2-day, 700-slide presentation. One morning as he was mulling this over, Tom Peters sat down at his desk on the 48th floor of the Bank of America Tower overlooking the San Francisco Bay. He closed his eyes, then he leaned forward and jotted down eight things on a pad of paper.

Those eight principles became the basis for the book he co-authored in the early 1980s that changed the landscape of corporate life in America. The title of the book was *In Search of Excellence*, and it had a profound effect among Wall Street analysts and corporate managers, and even today the word "excellence" is an important buzzword in the daily life of successful businesses and corporations. Almost every profession now has awards for excellence—excellence in journalism, excellence in broadcasting, excellence in health care, excellence in manufacturing.

But in our church life and in our Christian lives, sometimes we're still searching for excellence. What makes for excellence? Today I'd like to talk about excellence in our church and in our individual lives. The Bible gives a very good word about this here in 2 Corinthians 8, which is the passage we're coming to today in our study through this book of the Bible. Notice what he says in verse 7: But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

Background

Let me give you a little background. In the apostolic church, there was a tremendous conflict that was at the heart of Paul's ministry—the conflict between the Jewish Christians of Judea and the Gentile Christians of the rest of the world. Those hard-core Jewish converts to Christianity were having a hard time accepting the fact that some of their Jewish rituals and regulations weren't theologically necessary to be saved. Things like circumcision and dietary regulations were so ingrained into the Jewish consciousness that it was hard for them to grasp the full freedom of Christ. Jesus Christ fulfilled all those requirements, and the plain Gospel says that we are justified and saved by grace plus nothing. It is grace alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.

They had a great meeting and debate about it in Acts 15, and there were still bruised feelings and diverse opinions. So in an effort to promote healing, the apostle Paul asked himself, in a manner of speaking: "Why can I do and what can the Gentile churches in Europe do to help heal this divide? How can we repair some of the damage? I have it! The churches in Judea are bankrupt. The people are poor. Conditions are terrible. I'll take a special offering from the European churches and deliver it in the name of Christ to the Jewish Christians and that will not only be a Christian act of humanitarian assistance but maybe it will also promote healing between these two factions in the church."

So there are several passages in Paul's letters when he talks about this special financial offering he is taking. And here in 2 Corinthians, Paul devotes two full chapters—chapters 8 and 9—to this special offering. In the course of telling the Corinthians what he wanted and needed for them to do, he also gives us some great principles regarding handling our money, and regarding stewardship and giving. Today, with that as background, I'd like to focus on this verse 7: But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

I wonder if Paul wasn't speaking tongue-in-cheek here, because I get the impression that the only thing the Corinthians excelled in was in causing problems. They were excellent problem-causers. Nevertheless Paul said here, in effect, "Well, as long as you are so excellent, then excel in this, too. Excel in giving. Be excellent givers." But in broaching this subject, he didn't just limit his

remarks to the area of giving; he gave six areas in which our church (and every church) should be excellent.

Excel in Faith

First, we're to excel and to overflow in faith: But just as you excel in everything—in faith.... The New Testament doesn't just emphasize the personal faith of individual Christians but the corporate faith of individual churches. The book of Acts talks about those specific churches that were growing in faith and were established in faith and were demonstrating faith.

When Paul wrote the book of Romans, he opened this way: First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.

When he wrote to the Colossians, he said: We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith....

Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 1:3: We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith.

He opened the book of 2 Thessalonians, saying: We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more.

How do you recognize a church that excels and overflows in faith? One way is by the works they do. By the missionaries they send. By the ministries they sustain. That's what Paul said at the beginning of 1 Thessalonians—We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith. We believe that God is real, that the Bible is true, that Jesus Christ is alive, that we are called, that the Gospel is for the entire world. And because we believe this deeply we work at it faithfully. We invest our time and money and energy in children's ministry, in youth ministry, in music ministry, in outreach ministries, in benevolent ministries, in LifeGroup ministries, in global ministries. We demonstrate our faith by our works. We just tear into it, expecting God to use us and to bless our efforts.

Excel in Speech

The next area of excellence is in speech. The Greek word here is that familiar term *logos*, and it seems to refer to the church's public ministry of teaching and preaching. I was reading the other day in Newsweek about a new book that has become the fastest-selling book in the history of publishing with just over 1.75 million copies sold in its first three months. It was written by an Australian woman, a divorced mother in her 50s who hit a rocky patch in her business life and in her personal life. It was during a moment of despair that she discovered a book written in 1910 about getting rich through positive thinking. With that as inspiration she wrote her own self-help book and called it *The Secret*. It's a rather small book, with a cover that conveys a sense of DaVinci Code-type mystery, and it's taken off like gangbusters. I haven't read it, but according to Newsweek, its message is that when you think of things you want and focus on them with all your intention, then the law of attraction will get for you what you want every time. It's a new kind of self-help book for New Age people. If you want a parking space, think about it hard enough and there it will be. If you want a BMW, think about it hard enough and the law of attraction will draw it into your possession. It's sort of like positive thinking on magical, metaphysical steroids. This thinking has taken the world by storm through this little book, and the biggest advocate is Oprah Winfrey, who has devoted two broadcasts to it.

Well, New Age people may not realize it, they may not want to acknowledge it, but the church of Jesus Christ in this world has the real secret to the abundant life. We have the Gospel that liberates us and satisfies us. We have the Bible that tells us how to live. We have the way, the truth, and the life. And it's our responsibility in our sermons, in our lessons, and in our private conversations to share it with excellence. To teach it clearly and correctly. To rightly divide the Word of God. To share it whenever and wherever we can. The whole world is looking for the secret of the abundant life, and we have it here between four walls, between two covers, embodied in one Savior, and within our own hearts. We're to preach and teach and share this Book with excellence and with overflow.

Excel in Knowledge

Closely connected with that is the third area of excellence—knowledge. We're also to excel and to overflow in knowledge. Our people should understand spiritual realities as they are presented and taught in the Bible, and we should all be able to convey those to others clearly and effectively.

Overall, the success rate among Christians in America isn't very encouraging. There's a new book out entitled *Religious Literacy*, published earlier this year, and it was widely reviewed in the media. It's by a professor of religion at Boston University, Steve Prothero, and he sounds the alarm that people—even churchgoers in America—are woefully deficient in their knowledge of the Bible. According to his studies, sixty percent of Americans can't name half of the Ten Commandments, and fifty percent of high

school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were married.

I think we need to be lifelong students of the Bible. As I was preparing this very spot in my message, my wife, Katrina, called me on the telephone to tell me about her Bible study. She was preparing for a presentation, and she said, "I had forgotten how much fun it is to exegete Scripture. I got into the paragraph I was going to study and as I started studying it, it unfolded like a flower. It's been so much fun."

But at first, it can seem daunting. A few weeks ago, I had coffee with a young man and I asked him about his daily Bible reading and his devotions. "Oh," he said, "I bought a little devotional, and I read it; but I've got to find another one."

"Well," I said, "reading a devotional book or booklet is fine, but it's no substitute for reading the Bible on your own."

"Oh," he said, "but the Bible is so complicated that I can't understand it. Whenever I try to read it, I'm confused."

You may feel that way, but I want to tell you something. You can understand it. Knowing the Bible is like any other subject. It may seem complicated at first, but if you stick with it, it becomes increasingly understandable. Someone said that if you study any subject consistently for fifteen minutes a day every day, within just a few years you'll have gained the equivalent of a Ph.D., and that's true for Bible study.

You might need to get a good study Bible or a Bible handbook or a good one-volume commentary. But there is not a person in this room who can't become knowledgeable about the Scriptures if you'll do what the Bereans did in the book of Acts and study this Book daily. Begin somewhere simple. Start reading the book of Proverbs or the Gospel of John or one of Paul's letters. Read a little bit every day, and think about what you're reading. Make notes. Think of it as God speaking to you, and we grow in our knowledge of God's word line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.

A church whose members are doing this on a regular basis, it seems to me, is the church that is excelling in knowledge.

Excel in Earnestness

We're also to excel in earnestness. This speaks of our passion, our sincere commitment to Christ and to His cause. Some translations use the word "zeal" here, and that's a strong but frequently forgotten Bible word. Jesus said, "The zeal of Thy house hath eaten me up." That's the old translation, but it's still good. Nowadays it would be translated, "My passion for your work consumes Me."

Henry Saulnier has his own way of putting it. He headed up the ministry of Chicago's Old Pacific Garden Mission, from 1940 to 1986, where he was a bundle of compassion and whirlwind of activity. Even into his 80's, Saulnier endured increasing arthritic pain to work late into the night at the mission. During Gospel meetings at invitation time, he regularly hobbled up and down the aisles of the mission auditorium, tenderly placing an arm on the shoulders of sin-ravaged men, nudging them to go to the altar. He once summed up his philosophy of Christian work in one unconventional sentence: Work like the blazes, but give God the glory.

That's a good description of a healthy church. We excel in earnestness.

Excel in Love

Last but not least, we're told to excel in love: But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us....

Healthy church members love each other. I've just finished reading the memoirs of Julia Child, the famous chef who became famous at midlife because of her book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and her popular show on public television, *The French Chef*. In real life, Julia was a tall, opinionated, likeable woman with a distinctive voice, who had served in the OSS (the procurer to the CIA) in China under "Wild Bill Donovan." It was while serving in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) during World War II that she met Paul Child. The two were married in 1946, and in 1948 Paul was assigned to the American Embassy.

As they settled into their apartment in Paris, one evening they had a conversation about the rude Frenchman. Many people find Parisians rude, and many Americans are offended by the attitudes of French storekeepers and public officials. Paul, however, had a different notion. He told Julia that in the 1920s, he found 80 percent of the people difficult and 20 percent charming. Now the reverse was true—80 percent of the Parisians were charming and only 20 percent was rude. But Paul admitted that the difference wasn't really in the French. It was he himself who had changed, and this is the way he put it: "I am less sour now than I used to be," he said. "It's because of you, Julia." (Julia Child and Alex Prud'homme, *My Life in France* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), p. 25.)

Most of us are prone to be sour by nature, and we get ourselves into a state in which people easily offend us, upset us, get on our nerves, and exasperate us. We could easily blame others for our feelings, but the truth is that our biggest problem is usually in our own outlook. We get out of sorts so easily. But Jesus makes a difference in our attitude. We can say, "I'm more pleasant than I used to be, easier to get along with. I'm less sour now—and it's because of you, Jesus." It's because of Him that we can excel in love.

Excel in Giving

Now, having said all that, Paul is simply gearing up for his main point. He told the Corinthians, "Since you are excellent in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in love, see to it that you excel also in this grace of giving." The Bible is advocating here that we be a church filled with excellent givers. So how do we do that?

Well, that's what these two chapters are all about, and it's very interesting how Paul begins. He anticipates that the Corinthians are going to say, "Well, we just can't do very much. We don't have the funds right now."

A lot of people say that, and maybe there has been a time in your life when you've been tempted to say the same thing. "I'd like to give my tithes and offerings, but I just don't have the income right now. I can't even pay my bills." Well, I know times can be hard and I don't want to be unsympathetic, but I have to be true to the Bible; and that's one excuse the Bible doesn't allow us. Look again at the way this paragraph begins:

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their abilities...

The greatest illustration in giving in the whole history of stewardship was when Jesus was at the temple watching people as they brought their gifts. The wealthy came, the affluent came, the proud and the prosperous came. But the one person who moved the heart of the Lord Jesus was the poor widow who brought her mite and faithfully gave out of her poverty. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others" (Mark 12:44).

I've read stories about prisoners in concentration camps, death camps, and POW camps who were given scraps of bread and watery bowls of soup, and that's all they had. But they found a way of tithing from it. One man took a tenth of his bread every day and gave it to a fellow prisoner, and another man fasted every tenth day and gave his full meal on that day to someone else. The principle of the Bible is proportional giving—this passage says that we are to give "as God has prospered us."

In fact, I want us to read a few verses from these two chapters by way of a responsive reading. We may touch on this tonight, but I'm not going to devote another Sunday to working our way through these verses, so let's read them together and at least remind ourselves of what they are telling us to do.

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

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

Let me close with this. Last year we had a couple who celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and their children threw a party

in their honor. It was my pleasure to be included among the guests. During the evening, each of their children got up and made some appropriate remarks, and one of the daughters spoke of the things that had so impressed her about her parents as she had grown up. She said that something had taken place every single Sunday afternoon of her childhood. It was a wordless deed, just a simple action that required no explanation; but it left an indelible impression on her. Every Sunday afternoon, week after week, year after year without fail, her parents would sit down at the kitchen table, take out their checkbook, and write a check for that week's tithes and offerings to the church. They would put it in the offering envelope, fill out the outside, and take it to the evening service for the offering. Nothing was ever said about it, but this woman had grown up watching this simple act of faithfulness on the part of her parents, and it had shaped her life.

Let's all have a similar habit. Let's all leave a similar legacy. And just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in your love for one another, see that you also excel in the grace of giving.

2 Corinthians 9:7 Sermon

A \$100 bill, a \$20 bill, and a \$1 bill met up with each other at the shredder at the end of their natural lives. The \$100 said, "Well, I've had a good life. I've seen the whole world. I've been on cruises in Caribbean, safaris in Africa, and vacations in Europe."

The \$20 said, "Well, I've not done quite as well, but I have been to Atlantic City, Disneyland, and Starbucks."

They both turned to \$1 bill and asked, "How about you?" He said, "Oh, I've seen the whole nation from coast to coast. I've been from church to church to church..."

The \$100 bill asked, "What's a church?"

Well, we're in a series of messages called 24/7/365 on the subject of "everyday holiness," and today we're coming to the subject of tithing, stewardship, giving, and money. Since money is such a big part of our lives, and since giving is such a big part of the Christian life, it seemed only right that at least one of our 100 Bible memory verses should be on the subject of giving. If you could select only one verse in the Bible about stewardship, which one would it be?

Introduction: Great Verses in the Bible on Stewardship

There are many great verses in the Bible about giving; it's a very common theme in Scripture. One of my favorite verses is an obscure one in the book of 1 Chronicles, chapter 14. In this passage, King David took up an extended offering for the building of the temple of God in Jerusalem, and he was overwhelmed by the gifts that came in and by the generosity of his people. He prayed a great prayer of thanksgiving, and in this prayer he said: But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from You, and we have given You only what comes from Your hand (1 Chronicles 29:14).

That's a foundational, biblical definition of stewardship: giving back to God from what He has given us.

We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be;
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

It was David's son, Solomon, who actually saw to it that the temple was built. And Solomon himself said something wonderful about generous stewardship in Proverbs 3:9-10: Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops (the first part of all your income); then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

The book of Malachi has a very definitive word about this in Malachi 3: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse..."

The word "tithe" means tenth, and the practice of tithing is that of giving a tenth of our income to the Lord's work.

...that there may be food in my house. Test Me in this," says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

The Lord Jesus rephrased the promise of Malachi 3 in one of His greatest verses about stewardship in Luke 6:38: Give, and it will

be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

I've always been fond of the verses in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, in which the apostle Paul encourages us to establish a weekly pattern of giving on the Lord's day: Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatians churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income....

There's no lack of verses in the Bible on this subject. But the greatest two stewardship chapters in the Bible, in my opinion, are 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, which represent the Bible's most extended treatment on the subject of Christian giving. Look at 2 Corinthians 8:7:

But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

And look at verse 9: For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

And we can go on to the next chapter—2 Corinthians 9:6: Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

And now that brings us to the next verse, which is our key verse, our memory verse—2 Corinthians 9:7:

Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give,
not reluctantly or under compulsion,
for God loves a cheerful giver.

I can't say that verse is better than any of the others, but it does summarize four key aspects of giving.

1. Each One Should Give Faithfully

First, it tells us that each and every Christian should give faithfully to the Lord's work. Look at the first phrase of the verse. It's very simple: Each one should give.... I'm not taking this out of context; it's just that simple. It doesn't say just the wealthy or just the poor. It doesn't say just the mature or just the immature. It doesn't say just new Christians or veteran Christians. It doesn't say just young Christians or older ones. Every single person who knows Jesus Christ as Savior should give faithfully to His cause.

I believe this means students. When I got my first high school job at Jim Chambers Men's Shop in Elizabethton, I had already been taught to tithe. I don't remember if I learned that from my dad or my mom or my Sunday School teacher or my pastor. But I had been trained in that way, and to the best of my recollection that's what I did. I have a vague recollection of my dad taking me to the bank to open a checking account, and he showed me the check register and explained how to use it. And I'm pretty sure that he pointed out that one of the benefits of having a checking account was so I could write out a check for my tithe.

I believe even children should tithe. Do you know what an allowance is? Let me give you a good definition of the word allowance. It is the first opportunity in a person's life to discover the blessings and benefits of tithing. Childhood is that time of life in which we learn healthy patterns of living. Well, what's healthier than giving? What's more godly or God-like than giving? Think of it this way: If all the children of all the Christians in America learned from their very first dollar that a dime of that dollar belonged to the Lord, God's work on this earth would never be underfunded.

So the Bible says each one should give faithfully.

2. Each One Should Give Thoughtfully

Second, each one should give thoughtfully. This verse goes on to say: Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give.

In other words, it's not a matter of spur-of-the-moment giving. It's not a matter of saying: Oh, the ushers are about to pass the offering plate. Do I have a dollar bill in my pocket?

Or: Oh, that's a needy cause, I think I'll write a check.

Or: Oh, the Salvation Army bell-ringers are out at the grocery store; I think I'll drop in my loose change.

It's certainly all right to give impulsively; but when we're talking about Christian stewardship we're talking about a planned, consistent, thoughtful pattern of giving in our lives. Let me give you a word of testimony from Katrina and me on this. Over the years as she and I have discussed this, we've decided in our hearts to give to the Lord in three different ways.

First, we tithe to the Lord from our income. We've done this from the very first day of our marriage. Whenever we're paid or when we receive money, we assume that the top ten percent of that belongs to the Lord. We've done this for so long that we don't even think about it or miss the money. We have a sense of fulfillment in knowing that God allows us to have a part in supporting His work.

Second, from time to time we'll make special gifts and commitments. There are a handful of things we support beyond our regular tithes and offerings. It might be a missionary need or a capital stewardship campaign. Right now we're in the process of finishing up our commitment to the Loving God, Loving People Campaign that has been extended for an extra year. Sometimes we'll respond to an appeal we get through the mail. These are special occasion gifts and commitments.

Third, we have included the church in our wills. We want to honor God not only with the income we receive at the end of the week or at the end of the month, but at the end of our lives. Through the years, there is often an increase in the net worth of many people. We come into the world with nothing—absolutely naked. But by the time we die and go on to heaven, we've accumulated a lot of this world's value. Should we not tithe on that, too? Should not a portion of that go to the Lord's work? Katrina and I believe in the Lord's work on this earth, we believe in this church, and when we had our wills revised a couple of years ago we made sure that we included the church.

Well, you can think through these things for yourself. My point is that the Bible doesn't tell us to simply give casually or carelessly or on occasion, but thoughtfully and regularly. We pray through our situation, we think it through, and then we decide what God would have us do and we do it consistently and faithfully: Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give....

3. Each One Should Give Freely

The third principle is that we should do it freely: Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion....

In other words, we don't give because we have to give or because we're pressured or forced to give. We do it because we're excited about the privilege and blessings of it.

Every week we get bills in the mail. If there's one thing our society knows how to do, it's to send bills. We get an electric bill, and if we don't pay it they cut off our electricity. We get a water bill, and if we don't pay it they cut off our water. We get a bill for our taxes, and if we don't pay it they'll put us in jail. Well, the church of Jesus Christ on this earth is the biggest and most wonderful enterprise in human history, but it isn't financed by sending bills or assessing fees. For 2000 years, it's been supported by freewill offerings and voluntary contributions. The Lord established that principle right here in 2 Corinthians 9:7.

4. Each One Should Give Cheerfully

Finally, each one should give cheerfully. Look at how the verse ends: Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

That's a remarkable phrase. I cannot think of another time in the entire Bible when a similar phrase occurs. There are a lot of phrases that say that God loves us or God loves the world. But I cannot think of another attitude or activity in life that is commended in this way. The Bible almost seems to be saying that God is excited about us when we are excited about giving.

And that leads to another wonderful promise in the next verse: And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Now, in order to give with cheerful hearts, I think it's helpful to remember two things. First, we need to remember how much we own. When we come to Jesus Christ, we become heirs of God and joint heirs of Christ. He gives us certain things, and so we own our possessions. You own the clothes on your back. Maybe you own a car or a television set or a house or a rocking chair or a set of china. Through the years, we accumulate possessions, and we own what we own.

But we also own what God owns. Recently I put a little park bench along the sidewalk behind my house, and the other day I was

setting there looking out over the backyard. And I saw a beautiful redbird. It was just stunning, sitting on the fence. I saw two rabbits playing in the field. I saw a lovely cloud formation blowing through the sky. I saw the sunlight and I breathed the air and I realized that God owned all these things and I am an heir of God and a joint heir of Christ. I didn't have to purchase the sky or the clouds or the redbirds or the rabbits. I don't have to pay for the air I breathe. This is my Father's world, and He has given me richly all things to enjoy.

Furthermore, I own a Bible. I don't just mean that I own a book I hold in my hands and read with my eyes. I mean that I own all the promises and blessings and strength and hopefulness that book provides.

Furthermore, I own the title deed to a home that's being prepared for me in the city of New Jerusalem. If I listen real hard, I can almost hear the hammers and saws. In my Father's house are many mansions, and Christ has purchased for me everlasting life in the New Heavens and on the New Earth.

The songwriter said: "How rich I am since Jesus came my way! Redeemed my life and turned my night to day! How very rich, how very rich I am!" That's why Paul said: Consider the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though He was rich yet He became poor, so that we, through His poverty, might become rich."

So it's a joy to give our tithes and offerings as a token of our thankfulness for the abundance God has given us. It helps us be cheerful givers when we realize what we own.

But it also helps us be cheerful givers when we realize what we owe. There's an old song that says: "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. Sin had laid a crimson stain; He washed it white as snow."

We can never repay our Lord for what He did for us on Calvary's cost, and He charges no fees. But out of gratitude and everlasting loyalty, we give Him all we are and have.

O love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in its ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller, be.

We own so much and we owe so much, all because of Jesus Christ; and when that sinks into our hearts and minds, we can't help but be cheerful givers.

Conclusion

I preached on this subject ten years ago, and in that sermon I used a story I had read in World Vision Magazine. I'd almost forgotten the story, but in preparing for this message today, I dug through my files and found it. It's a true testimony from the life of a man named Lyle Eggleston, who served as a missionary for many years in a little town on the rocky coast of northern Chile. In time, the congregation grew to about 80 adults, but Eggleston was concerned that the Christians in that area didn't seem able to support their own national pastor. The people were very poor, and the church's offerings amounted to no more than six dollars a month.

One day, Eggleston brought the problem to the Lord during a definite time of prayer. A few weeks later he stopped to visit a middle-aged couple, new converts who had begun the habit of reading their Bibles every day.

"What does the word tithing mean?" asked Manuel. "We ran into that in our reading and we don't understand it."

Eggleston didn't really want to answer the question, for he knew that Manuel and his wife were unemployed and on the verge of destitution. They were somehow managing to feed themselves and their 25 Rhode Island hens on the income from the eggs laid each day.

Nevertheless they insisted he explain the concept of tithing to them, so he turned to the passages we've looked at today from 1 and 2 Corinthians, and he shared essentially what we've studied today. The following Sunday Manuel handed Lyle an envelope and, smiling, said, "That's our tithe!" Inside were a few bills amounting to about 19 cents.

The next Sunday afternoon, the couple flagged down Lyle as he rode his bicycle past their house. They had some exciting news.

The Tuesday morning after they had given their tithe, there's wasn't a bite for breakfast nor any money. Their first impulse was to take the few pesos that had accumulated in their "tithe box," but on second thought they said, "No. That's God's money. We will go without breakfast this morning."

There was nothing to do but tend the hens. Much to their surprise, there were eggs in the nests that had usually at that hour been empty. Later in the day, a little man came along with a pushcart wanting fertilizer. They cleaned out their hen house, and the manure brought a good price. After buying groceries, there was enough money left over for the wife to purchase a pair of shoes, so she rode the bus 12 kilometers around the bay into a larger town. There she bumped into a nephew she had not seen in five years, and who, to her utter surprise, owned a shoe store. After she had found just the pair she wanted, he wrapped them for her and handed her the package with these words, "Oh no, Aunt, I can't take your money. These shoes are a gift from me."

The following week, Manuel got a job on a project that would last for two years, and soon the little couple was tithing on a much larger salary. Word got around the church, and others began experimenting with giving. Soon the church's income began to rise dramatically, and they were able to pay their own rent and utility bills, support a national pastor who was working with Indians, and, in a short time, they were able to call and finance a pastor of their own.

Lyle Eggleston and his wife were able to move to a new location and start a new work as the little church grew in numbers, size, property, and faith. "We had offered up a bit of prayer and 19 cents," Lyle later said, "and God did the rest."

He'll do the rest for you and me, too.

Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give,
not reluctantly or under compulsion,
for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 10:5 Every Thought Captive

When I was a teenager, a fad swept through our little town and all over the country. Everyone had to have a citizen's band radio in his or her cars. My dad really got into the CB craze, and he had one in every car and truck that we owned. And everyone had to have a certain name that he used when he talked over it. And much of your conversation was in numerical code. You'd ask someone, "What's your 10-20?" and that meant, "Where are you?"

Well, the most common number was 10-4, and it was usually followed by the words, "Good Buddy." I don't know how many times I heard my father adjust the squelch knob on his CB, listen to someone say something from a passing car, and his reply was, "10-4, Good Buddy." It meant, "Roger that. A-OK."

Up in Roan Mountain, there was a church having trouble with their new sound system; sometimes the CB traffic would filter in through the speakers. One morning the pastor rose for his morning prayer and said, "Our Father in heaven..." And just at that moment, the words blared back: "10-4, Good Buddy. You're coming in loud and clear!"

Well, today I want to teach you a new code. It's 10-5. And 10-5 has a different message. It means, "Take every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ." That's the message of 2 Corinthians 10:5, and I've given you this introduction to help you remember the reference. Today I'd like to talk about having a 10-5 mind.

Let's read that verse together: We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ.

Biblical Background

The most important thing about us is our thinking, our minds. Marcus Aurelius wrote, "The most important things in life are the thoughts you choose to think." Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "A man is what he thinks about all day long." Or as the Bible puts, "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). Our thoughts make us what we are. And the Bible teaches that when we come to Jesus Christ, a great change takes place in the area of our minds and of our thinking. Romans 12:1 says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will."

This is very important to us, because every temptation comes to us via our thoughts. Well, we're coming to that classic text today in 2 Corinthians that talks about taking every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ. It's a wonderful concept, but what does it really mean within the context of this epistle and within the context of this book of 2 Corinthians? Let's begin reading with 2 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 1:

By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” when away! I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine powers to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

Chapter 10 marks a very important transition and division in this book, and to really understand it I think we have to go all the way back to 1 Corinthians 1 and get the whole picture. There are some things that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 that correspond exactly to what he is saying here in chapter 10 of 2 Corinthians. Here's the background.

When Paul established the church at Corinth, it was in a very pagan and hostile environment, for Corinth was one of the most pagan and ungodly cities on earth. After Paul left, some false teachers showed up, and they sowed great discord in the church, causing Paul endless grief. These teachers distained Paul. They said he was an unimpressive speaker, a second-rate intellect, a fanatic whose message was far too simple, and these teachers—Paul referred to them as claiming to be super-apostles—claimed to have what Paul did not have—eloquence and human philosophy and reasoning and oratory and a Gnostic-like theology that stressed hidden wisdom. They claimed to be scholars and philosophers. They may have been some of the early precursors of the Gnostic teachers that the church battled in the second and third centuries. At any rate, they claimed that Paul's message was foolish and his presence was weak, and that while his letters sounded authoritative and persuasive, in person he was a very disappointing person indeed. So Paul addressed this in 1 Corinthians, chapter 1:18ff:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand a miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God....

He continued in chapter 2:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but in demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Now, in 2 Corinthians 10, the apostle Paul is still beating the same drum. I want to just walk through this chapter with you and show you what he is saying. Let's go back to 2 Corinthians 10, verse 1:

By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” when away!

Notice that in the NIV the words timid and bold are in quotation marks. Paul was aware of what these so-called super-apostles were saying. “Oh, his letters seem impressive, but what a disappointment he is face-to-face,” they were telling the people. Well, Paul said, “This is me speaking—the one accused of being bold in my letters and timid in person.

I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world.

By standards of this world, Paul is referring to the criticisms coming from these so-called super-apostles. He seemed to be saying something like this: “They don't accept me as being sent with the authority of Christ. They think my message is just some worldly

wisdom that I developed.”

He went on:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.

What are the weapons of this world—the things he mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1—oratory, human reasoning, human philosophy, persuasive presentations based on human resourcefulness.

On the contrary, (the weapons we fight with) have divine powers to demolish strongholds.

What weapons are those? The ones he mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1—the power of the cross, the simplicity of the Gospel, the power of Christ and Him crucified. With that simple message, what do we do?

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

In other words, the apostle said something like this: I will come to Corinth myself and confront every false teacher and oppose every heresy and I will do everything in my power to bring the theology and the doctrine and the beliefs and the thinking of the church into conformity with the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That’s the message that changes lives. That’s the message that does something to the human heart that no other philosophy can ever do.

Look at verse 8: For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it. I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.

And go on to chapter 11, verses 2ff:

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds... – Notice that word again: minds. Paul was concerned about their minds, their thoughts, their philosophy, their theology, their intellect, their doctrine, their beliefs, their thinking—I am afraid that your minds might somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those “super-apostles.” I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge.

And down in verse 13ff: For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness.

He was saying, “These false teachers seem so sincere and so pious, and they may seem like super-apostles with hidden wisdom, great oratorical abilities, and impressive credentials. But they are evil, erring men masquerading as apostles of Christ, peddling a false Gospel. And when I come I will confront false doctrine in the church and I will take every teaching and bring it into the captivity of the message of Jesus Christ.

So in summary, here in chapter 10, Paul is saying, “I may seem meek and I may seem mild, but I will not put up with false doctrine in the church. I will wage war for the pure doctrine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and my weapons are not eloquence or oratory. I have one weapon and one weapon only—the preaching of the cross, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to us who are being saved, it is the very power of God. And with this message of Christ Crucified, I intend to take every teaching and every thought in the church and make it captive to the cross of Jesus Christ. Every theology and every philosophy and every lesson must correspond with and yield to the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ.

When Paul says that every thought should be captive to Christ, that’s what he means. He’s speaking theologically and intellectually. He’s talking about the doctrine of the church. And that message has never been more needed than it is today.

Personal Application

For our purposes this morning, there are two areas of personal application here. The first comes from the main emphasis of the text—we must have sound theology and sound teaching. Our thinking must be based on the foundation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

But there's a secondary application, which is this: Just as we make sure that our thinking conforms to the message of Christ and Him crucified, so we have to take every thought in our brains and all the thought patterns of our minds and bring these under the shadow of the cross and make sure that all our thoughts are captive to obedience to Lord Jesus Christ.

As I said earlier, all the temptations we face come to us via our thoughts. We think about lying before we do it. We think about adultery before we do it. We think about secret sins and lustful behavior before we commit it. We think covetous thoughts before we make that unwise purchase. We think those angry thoughts before we say those angry words.

There is a wonderful story in a book entitled *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, which was based on Dr. King's speeches and writings. On one occasion he told of growing up in Atlanta, Georgia: "I remember another experience I used to have in Atlanta. I went to high school on the other side of town—to the Booker T. Washington High School. I had to get the bus in what was known as the Fourth Ward and ride over to the West Side. In those days, rigid patterns of segregation existed on the buses, so that Negroes had to sit in the backs of buses. Whites were seated in the front, and often if whites didn't get on the buses, those seats were still reserved for whites only, so Negroes had to stand over empty seats. I would end up having to go to the back of that bus with my body, but every time I got on that bus I left my mind up on the front seat. And I said to myself, "One of these days, I'm going to put my body up there where my mind is." (Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1998), p. 9.)

And he did. Our bodies and our lives always end up where our minds are. A few months ago I delivered a Sunday morning message about the perils of pornography, and it's very easy to have a pornographic brain. Or it's easy to have a brain that thinks depressed thoughts all the time. It's easy to have a greedy, materialistic mind. All our temptations and sins come to us via our brains.

So how do we take every thought and make them captive to Christ? I have four important prescriptions.

Starve

First, you have to starve your mind. The temptations and sins inside your brain thrive on what you feed them, and if you cut off their food supply, they'll begin to gradually wither up. I know a man who, when he checks into the hotel on business trips, asks that they disconnect the television because he doesn't want to be tempted. A lot of the trouble you're having with your thought life would clear up if you'd stop feeding your sin with salacious materials.

Feed

Second, feed your mind. Find Bible verses to memorize and start pushing out the wrong thoughts with the right ones. Choose some verses having to do with the mind and with the thoughts, and commit them to memory.

Isaiah 26:3-4 says, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee."

Romans 12:1-2, which I've already referred to, tells us to yield our bodies as living sacrifices and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Philippians 2:5 says, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

Romans 8 says, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace."

There's tremendous power in memorizing these verses and meditating on them; and whenever tempting thoughts float through your brain, train yourself to refuse them by quoting Scripture to them. That's the way Jesus defeated Satan in Matthew 4, and you can do the same. Starve the bad thoughts and feed the good ones.

The biography of Geoffery Bull, the British missionary to Tibet who was captured and imprisoned by Chinese Communists, tells of

how his captors took Bull's possessions from him, threw him in a series of prisons, robbed him of his Bible, made him suffer terribly at their hands for three years. In addition to extreme temperatures and miserable physical conditions, coupled with bodily abuse and near starvation, Bull was subjected to such mental and psychological torture that he feared he would go insane.

He had no Bible now, but he had studied the Bible all his life. So he began to systematically go over the Scriptures in his mind. He found it took him about six months to go all the way through the Bible mentally. He started at Genesis, and recalled each incident and story as best he could, first concentrating on the content and then musing on certain points, seeking light in prayer. He continued through the Old Testament, reconstructing the books and chapters as best he could, then into the New Testament and on to Revelation. Then he started over again. He later wrote, "The strength received through this meditation was, I believe, a vital factor in bringing me through, kept by the faith to the very end." (Geoffrey T. Bull, *When Iron Gates Yield* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), passim.)

So many people have iPod's now, and I want to encourage you to find biblical lectures and sermons and download them. Instead of listening to some of the music or talk radio that usually blares from the car radio, listen to scripture and sermons and Bible lectures. (Check out the podcasts on our www.donelson.org website.) Feed your mind.

Take Control

Third, take control of this area of your life. I had a letter recently from a man in Illinois who told me that after he got out of the service he spent a great deal of his time driving tour buses for various groups. As a result, he said, he was often on the road driving through the night. Everyone else was asleep, and he couldn't listen to the radio and he had no one to talk to; and he was tempted during his long hours at the wheel to fantasize and think lustful thoughts. But, he said, I developed a plan. It had three parts. For the first third of my time, I forced my mind to meditate on Scripture passages that I had read or learned or studied or memorized. The middle portion of the time was spent in prayer and I took my time in bringing to the Lord every item of praise and prayer that I had on my heart. The last third of the time was in quietly singing to myself the great hymns of the faith. I found that when I followed this pattern, the devil never had a chance with my thoughts.

Report In

It's important for most of us to report in, to have someone with whom we can be honest about areas in which we need accountability. I've spoken about that recently, and I think most of us realize that this is often a very helpful tool.

We live in a twisted world of temptation; and Christians are being bombarded from every direction. The Lord Jesus wants control of our minds. He wants us to be pure of mind. He wants us to be renewed in our minds. He wants every thought captive to Him. Starve, feed, take control, and report in. Keep a healthy, positive, clean mind.

And let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, for Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee.

2 Corinthians 12:9 My Grace is Sufficient

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:9

Some time ago, I had a phone call from a woman in Minnesota who told me she and her husband worked hard to build their own business, but when he died she was unable to hold the business together and the bank foreclosed on it. She left the meeting with the bankers in tears, and she went to her car where she saw a daily devotional magazine laying there on the seat. It was two years old. It was opened to the verse of our text today, "My grace is sufficient for you." She told me that this verse—2 Corinthians 12:9—gave her supernatural strength for that moment, and in the years since then she has seen many good things that have come from those events, including a powerful opportunity to share her testimony to the banker involved.

Exposition

Well, this is one of the most powerful and beloved verses in all the Bible. In chapters 11 and 12, the apostle Paul seemed to feel that he had to explain himself to his critics in the Corinthian church. He did so unwillingly. He would much rather talk about Christ, not about himself. It's like Billy Graham this week, when they held the dedication of the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte. He looked at it and his comment was, "Too much Billy Graham." That's the way Paul felt about chapters 11 and 12 of 2 Corinthians. He was facing a situation in the Corinthian church that required him to talk about himself and to explain himself and to defend himself, but he wasn't very happy about that, because his message wasn't about himself, it was about Christ. He didn't want to be the issue, and

you can tell as you read these chapters that he was very uncomfortable devoting so much space to himself. But he knew that his credibility in presenting the Gospel had been challenged, and he saw no alternative except to explain and defend himself so that the doctrine he was preaching would not be discredited.

There's a lesson there, because we all have to be cautious about becoming self-centered and self-absorbed. The attitude we need to adopt is that of John the Baptist, who said, "I must decrease but He must increase."

Well, as we continue on with our studies in 2 Corinthians, we're in this section that goes from the middle of chapter 11 to the middle of chapter 12. Notice how he begins in chapter 11:16:

I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.

I don't have time to take you through the entire context here, but these false teachers and false apostles had come to Corinth and flashed their credentials and resumes, and the people were impressed with them. So Paul was saying here, in summary, "I'm not inferior to these men. I have credentials, too. I, too, have a resume. I feel like a fool talking so much about myself, but what choice do I have?" And he went on to give us three sections to his resume.

First, he reminds us of his heritage. Look at verse 22: Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.

"These false teachers lay claim to their Jewish roots. Well, if anyone has Jewish roots, it's me." He went into this in greater detail in Philippians 3, but he touches on it here as well.

Then he reminds them of his hard work and his hardships. Look at verse 23ff.: Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and I have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window on the wall and slipped through his hands.

Now we come to chapter 12, and Paul continues his defense. Having told them about his heritage and his hard work and hardships, now he wants to tell them about his visions and revelations. In the Old Testament, God gave certain men and women revelations and visions explaining His plan to them. In the New Testament, the same thing happened with Paul. God revealed to him the critical aspects of the Gospel and its meaning and its significance. God revealed to him some aspects of the doctrine of justification by grace and some aspects of the role of the church and the dispensation of the church age. But here in chapter 12, Paul mentions one particular revelation or vision that he had which he talks about nowhere else in Scripture.

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so that no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do and say.

In other words, Paul is saying, "If these false apostles and heretical teachers are telling you that they've had certain visions from the Lord, well, believe me, I have had visions and revelations, too. In fact, in one revelation I was taken right up to heaven and given a glimpse of New Jerusalem itself."

But now he begins to segue into the thorn of the flesh passage. He says, in effect: "These false teachers who are influencing you claim to have a strong Jewish heritage and a string of accomplishments and a set of visions and revelations. Fine! I'll match them

at every point. I have a strong Jewish heritage. I have worked hard and suffered much. I have had special revelations from God. In fact, my greatest revelation is one I can't even talk about. I was caught up into the third heaven, into the very presence of God Himself in the New Jerusalem. I've had such extraordinary visions that it isn't humanly possible to have experienced them and to subsequently remain a humble man, and so the Lord has allowed me to be afflicted with a physical problem to keep me humble."

Look at verse 7ff:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh.

The Greek word for thorn indicated a sharp piece of wood, whether a splinter or a thorn or a hook or even a stake. It was something that caused pain and irritation, and it seems to refer to some disease or physical problem that afflicted Paul. We don't know what Paul was referring to specifically. Some people think he suffered from recurring malaria, others that he had a serious eye problem. I think the best answer—the one that the Holy Spirit would point out to us—is that Paul's thorn in the flesh is whatever physical problem you or I are having right now. Paul obviously didn't tell us exactly what it was because he wanted this teaching to transfer and apply to your situation and mine. So if you have cancer or a heart problem or Multiple Sclerosis like my wife battles, or psoriasis like I have, or aging issues, or any kind of debilitating condition—whatever it is, that's what Paul is talking about.

Notice that he describes it as "a messenger of Satan." The Greek word for messenger is *angolos*, or angel. The word "angel" literally means "messenger." Sickness and illness are Satan's angels, his messengers, that he sends to distract and defeat us.

In the Old Testament, we see this in the book of Job, which we're going to look at, Lord willing, this fall. We're specifically told that it was the devil who ruined Job's health and afflicted him with a loathsome skin disease. We have the same thing here in 2 Corinthians 12, when Paul describes his physical sickness as a messenger of Satan. We do not have many didactic teachings in the Bible that provide systematic explanations for the exact role the devil plays in disease and illness. I don't like to speculate too much on this. But we can observe something about this from the biblical examples of Job in the Old Testament and Paul in the New Testament: Sometimes it appears that God allows Satan to send physical problems and illnesses and diseases into our lives. The devil wants to tear down our faith and to use these things to hinder our service to the Lord. But God wants to use the same things to build up our faith and to make us even more usable and useful to His Kingdom.

Paul's response is given in verse 8: Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

It's biblical to pray for healing. Jesus is the Great Physician, and James 5 tells us to pray for healing and to have others to pray along with us. But in this case, the Lord answered with a "No." The word "No" doesn't actually occur here, but look at the way verse 9 begins with the words, But He said to me....

"Three times I asked God to heal me of this disability, but He said to me..." That indicates that God declined the prayer request, but He had something better. He had a word of divine revelation. He had a message for Paul that was greater than the physical healing.

Now, since this is one of the greatest verses in the Bible, I'd like for us to look at this answer from God word for word, beginning with that first word, My....

My grace is sufficient for you.

In my Bible those words are in red, indicating that they were spoken by the Lord Jesus Himself. I think it would be an interesting Bible study to read through the book of Acts and the letters of St. Paul the Apostle and isolate those several times in which the Lord Jesus revealed Himself directly to the apostle. The first time, of course, was on the Damascus Road. But there were several other times in which Paul and Jesus Christ had direct interaction, and this seems to be one of those occasions. If you have a red letter Bible, just thumb through the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, looking for any words that show up in red letters. Those are statements from the lips of Christ Himself, and when you read them you can just imagine Jesus appearing and speaking personally to Paul; and furthermore, think of Jesus speaking personally to you. Those who heard Him when He labored on earth said that no one ever spoke like He did, for He taught with authority and not as the Pharisees or the scribes. That's the way He speaks to you and me, and so this is a personal message from Jesus, in red letters to your heart, and He says, "My grace is sufficient for you."

My grace is sufficient for you

He also says, "My grace is sufficient for you." The word grace is one of the most expansive words in God's vocabulary. It encompasses all the gifts and benefits and blessings that God gives us—past, present, and future. When we talk about being saved by grace, we're talking about God's free gift of eternal life that was gained for us when Christ died on the cross and finished the work

of redemption. There's nothing we can do to earn our salvation or to qualify ourselves for heaven. It's all by grace—a gift of God. But that word grace also includes all the other blessings and benefits and gifts that come from God. A good way of looking at it is noticing how many of God's blessings begin with the letter "P."

- Ø Pardon. Forgiveness of sin; every spot of guilt and failure in our lives is fully and eternally banished and cleansed.
- Ø Peace. We have a settled sense of security and joy in life because of Christ. In Christ there is freedom from worry and alarm.
- Ø Provision. Every need we have or will ever have is supplied out of the riches of God's grace.
- Ø Protection. We are kept under the watchful eye of God.
- Ø Promises. The Bible is packed with promises, each one of which is infinitely precious to God's children.
- Ø Power. We have all the power of heaven and earth available to help us in our daily lives.
- Ø Presence. We have the very presence of God within us and around us. Jesus promised to be with us always. In my quiet time this week, I found a verse in the Psalm about the joy and privilege of walking in the light of His presence.
- Ø Providence. We have the personal providence of God over our lives, making sure that all things work out for our good.

So when God says, "My grace is sufficient for you," He is saying, "My pardon, peace, provision, protection, promises, power, presence, and providence is sufficient for you."

My grace is sufficient for you

Now, notice the verb—is. That is not past tense or future tense, it is present tense. He is a very present help in time of trouble. He is perpetually present and His grace is perpetually available.

In the early days of the English Keswick Bible Conference in the Lakes District of England, one of the most popular Bible teachers was a man named Prebendary Webb-Peploe. When Dr. Webb-Peploe was a young man, one of his dear children died suddenly while the family vacationed at the seaside. Returning from the funeral, the father was wracked with grief, and he went into his study and knelt in prayer, beseeching God to make His grace sufficient. "Lord," he said, "please make your grace sufficient." But he felt no comfort, and he sobbed in dark despair and pain. He tried to read his Bible, but there seemed no message there for him. Then he happened to glance up and see the framing over the fireplace. It was the very text of Scripture about which he had been praying—2 Corinthians 12:9. For the first time he noticed that one word was printed in capital letters, the word IS: My grace IS sufficient for thee." Suddenly the light came on. "Lord, forgive me," he cried. "I have been asking Thee to make Thy grace sufficient for me, and all the time Thou hast been saying to me, 'My grace IS sufficient for thee.' I thank Thee for sufficient grace and I appropriate it now.

My grace is sufficient for you

The next word is sufficient: My grace is sufficient for you. This may be the most understated word in the Bible. God's grace is sufficient. The word means, "It is enough." According to Forbes Magazine, there are 946 billionaires in the world right now. Suppose one of them was your daddy, and you had a cold and he went with you to the pharmacy to pick up your prescription. There was a ten dollar co-pay. You might say, "What are going to do? There's a ten-dollar co-pay!" He would laugh and say, "Don't worry about that. I think I can take care of it. My \$23 billion portfolio is sufficient to pay this \$10 co-pay." My goodness, he could buy the whole pharmacy if he wanted to, or the whole pharmaceutical company. His wealth was sufficient. In our case, however, even that illustration breaks down because our Lord's wealth is infinite. He can dispense and dispense and dispense without any reduction of the principle.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once spoke eloquently about this. He told of riding a carriage home one evening after a hard day's work. He was weary and, with his weariness came depression. Suddenly this verse flashed into his mind, and when he got home he looked it up and studied it. Spurgeon later said:

MY grace is sufficient for THEE. 'Why,' I said to myself, 'I should think it is!' and I burst out laughing. It seemed to make unbelief so absurd. It was as though some little fish, being very thirsty, was troubled about drinking the river dry; and Father Thames said: 'Drink away, little fish, my stream is sufficient for thee!' Or as if a little mouse in the granaries of Egypt, after seven years of plenty, feared lest it should die of famine, and Joseph said, 'Cheer up, little mouse, my granaries are sufficient for thee!' Again, I

imagined a man away up yonder on the mountain saying to himself, 'I fear I shall exhaust all the oxygen in the atmosphere.' But the earth cries: 'Breathe away, O man, and fill thy lungs; my atmosphere is sufficient for thee!'"

You can never drain the oceans of His grace, or deplete the granaries of His goodness, or exhaust the atmosphere of His blessings. His grace is sufficient.

My grace is sufficient for you

Finally, notice those last two words, which make it personal to each of us: My grace is sufficient for you.

If you've ever read the classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, you know it was written by a simple tinker and Baptist preacher who was imprisoned for his faith and for his preaching. This was in 17th century England, and Bunyan had a wife and family to support, which included a little blind daughter to whom he was deeply devoted. Yet here he was, year after year, in prison for his faith. In his autobiographical book, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan tells of a time when he was so cast down that he could hardly function. He was suffering from acute depression, but right in the middle of his struggles and darkness, this phrase came to his mind with tremendous force. For several weeks, that phrase stayed in Bunyan's mind and kept him from the brink of depression and despair; but then he felt himself slipping away with the undertow of his fears and darkness. That's when, one day as he was in a meeting of God's people this verse came to him again, but this time more fully, for the it wasn't just the four words My grace is sufficient. It also came into his mind with those last two words as well: My grace is sufficient for thee.

Bunyan wrote in his quaint style, "As I was now thinking my soul was never the better; but my case most sad and fearful, these words did, with great power, suddenly break in upon me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee, my grace is sufficient for thee, my grace is sufficient for thee,' three times together; and, oh! methought that every word was a mighty word unto me; as my, and grace, and sufficient, and for thee; they were then, and sometimes are still, far bigger than others be. At which time my understanding was so enlightened, that it was as though I had seen the Lord Jesus look down from heaven through the tiles upon me, and direct those words unto me." (John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 96.)

Now, there is another part of this sentence. By way of further explanation, the Lord tells us: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. In other words, our weakness becomes an arena in which God's power can be more effectively displayed.

When I was in college, a professor assigned a book for our class by Dr. J. Oswald Sanders, and I'll have to say that it became a very influential book in my life. The title is *A Spiritual Clinic*, and I still have my old original copy. J. Oswald Sanders put it, "At first (Paul) saw it as a limiting handicap, but later, when he saw it in its true perspective, he came to regard it as a heavenly advantage." (J. Oswald Sanders, *A Spiritual Clinic* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 33.)

That's true for us because of God's grace. What others see as a limiting handicap is actually a heavenly advantage.

Catherine Booth, who is sometimes called the "Mother of the Salvation Army," worked side-by-side with her husband William in feeding, clothing, and saving impoverished souls in the name of Christ. Despite chronic illness, she pressed on, sustained by this verse that she had memorized in childhood—2 Corinthians 12:9.

She kept the verse on the wall near her bed, making it was the last thing she saw at night and the first thing she saw in the morning. When at age 59, she was near death, her lips moved, desiring to speak, but no voice was heard. Instead, Catherine lifted a bony finger and pointed to the text on the wall.

"It was," said the minister at her funeral, "her text."

I'd like to suggest today that you keep 2 Corinthians 2:9 as your text. Memorize it and quote it often. Share it with others. Put it on the walls of your house like a motto, and draw from this truth in every condition, in sickness and health, in poverty's veil or abounding it in wealth, at home or abroad, or the land or the sea.

And when through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
His grace, all sufficient, shall be your supply;
The flame shall not hurt you; He only designs
Your dross to consume, and your gold to refine.

It's a verse with your name on it, and mine. He says to each of His children: My grace is sufficient for you.

2 Corinthians 13:14 God Bless You

Today we're coming to the end of our Sunday morning pulpit studies from 2 Corinthians, which we began in February. These messages have encompassed two sermon series and have covered all thirteen chapters of 2 Corinthians, and today we're coming to the last chapter of the book. This is a short chapter, so I want to read it to you, but then we'll zero in on the last verse of the book—2 Corinthians 13:14, the famous "Apostolic Benediction," as it's sometimes called.

Paul begins chapter 13 with a word of warning toward those who have been so critical of him and of his message and who have tried to undercut his authority and to preach a different Jesus and a different Gospel. He warns them that he is going to visit them soon and will deal with them authoritatively.

Look at chapter 12, verse 14: Now I am ready to visit you for a third time....

And verse 20: I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be....

And verse 21: I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.

The Corinthian society was very corrupt, and it was filtering into the church. That's a great concern for American Christianity today, and this is a good time for me to remind you that if we call ourselves Christians, there are moral implications to that regarding our behavior. Paul was very concerned that many people in this church of Corinth of Corinth were still engaged in impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery.

And now we come to chapter 13:

This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me....

And now, the apostle Paul is going to write one of his most pointed and important paragraphs, and here's what he's going to say. He is going to say, "I have a nagging suspicion that some of you in the Corinthian church are not really born-again followers of Christ. You think you're saved. You think you're going to heaven. But you're deceived about it, and you need to examine yourselves at just this point. Your life is not being lived as a Christian should live. You carelessly question my credentials as a Christian, but you should carefully question your own." Look at verses 5ff.:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test....

Now, in verse 11, we get to his final greetings:

Finally brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings.

And now, within this closing context, we come to the verse I want to emphasize—the apostolic benediction in verse 14. Despite all the problems, disappointments, and warnings, the apostle Paul ends with a prayer that God will bless this church and its people:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
2 Corinthians 13:14

We call this a benediction. A benediction is a prayer of blessing at the end of a worship service, or, in this case, at the end of a book in the Bible. It comes from the old Latin word *benedictus*, which is made up of a prefix meaning well coupled with the verb to speak. It isn't a word (the word "benediction") that occurs in the Bible; you'll not find the word benediction in a concordance. It's a word that was developed during the course of Christian history to describe prayers at the end of a worship service in which the pastor blesses the people in the name of God. That's why we talk about pronouncing the benediction. But even though the word benediction does not occur in the Bible, benedictions do occur. That is, there are a number of prayers in which the priests of the Old

Testament or the writers of the New Testament bless God's people.

1. Benedictions Tell Us That God Wants to Bless Us

I love the benedictions of Scripture. For many years, I closed our evening services with the one that occurs near the end of the book of Hebrews: May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

There's also a benediction in Roman 15 that has a very nice ring to it: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So there are some wonderful benedictions throughout Scripture, and from time to time I've thought of preparing a sermon series based on these passages in the Bible—a sermon series of benedictions.

Of all these various benedictions in the Bible, two are the best known. One is called the Aaronic benediction and the other is called the Apostolic Benediction.

The Aaronic Benediction is the one in Numbers 6 which was spoken to the tribes of Israel by Aaron and by succeeding members of the priestly line of Aaron, and which we often use today. For the last year or two, I've used this at the close of our morning services here at TDF: The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.

The New Testament counterpart to that is the Apostolic Benediction, as it's often called today, even though Paul wasn't one of the original twelve apostles in the Gospels. This seems to be, in some sense, the New Testament analogue to the Old Testament Aaronic Benediction. It's almost like having two great columns supporting the roof of God's blessings over our heads, and taken together they tell us one great thing—God wants to bless our lives. It's in His nature to bless us. When I was growing up, there were two great evangelists who were nationally known. One was Oral Roberts. We didn't follow Oral Roberts very much because he was Pentecostal, and we were not. But sometimes we'd just see what he had to say, and I came to have a certain appreciation for him. One of Oral Roberts' great themes was: Expect a Miracle Today!

The Psalmist puts it another way in Psalm 56. This particular Psalm was written by David when he was running for his life. He discusses various enemies that were opposing him. He begins by saying: Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; all day long they press their attack. In verse 2, he talks about those who have slandered him; and if you've ever been slandered, you know how frustrating that is. Your reputation is being attacked, lies are swirling around you, and you can't get it all straightened out. In verse 5, he says, All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me. In verse 6, he complains that his enemies were watching his every step, ready to bring him down. I don't know if you've ever had anything like this happen to you, but it's very frustrating. But then we come to verse 9, and I want you to notice the last four words of that verse: God is for me. Underline those four little words; put your name in them. God is for you.

There's one other time when this phrase occurs in the Bible, and that's in Romans 8, when the apostle Paul says, "If God is for us who can be against us?"

God is for you. He wants to bless you. He wants you to expect miracles day by day. Psalm 23 says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." John 1:16 says, "From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another." Jesus said in John 10: "I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly."

I read about a little boy who had to be in the hospital for several days, so his father fixed up a large surprise-box of lovely gifts, one to be opened each day. That's what God has done for us. Each day we find new surprises and blessings that God gives us. And the presence of all these benedictions in the Bible, including this one here in 2 Corinthians 13, simply speaks to the fact that God wants to bless your life and mine every day.

It helps us in so many ways when we adopt this biblical view of what God is like, and when we realize that He wants to bless our lives. It helps us emotionally and psychologically; it helps us with our self-image and with our God-image; it helps us with our daily attitudes and outlooks. Expect a miracle today, for God is for you. He wants to bless your life—and that's why we have these marvelous benedictions of Scripture.

2. The Blessings Are Triune in Nature:

Each Member of the Trinity Wants to Bless Us

Now as we read this Apostolic Benediction in particular, the first thing we notice is that it is Trinitarian in nature. Each Member of the Trinity wants to bless us—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It says:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God (apparently referring to God the Father), and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

When we use the word Trinitarian and the Trinity, what are we talking about? Here again, this is not a term you find in the Bible. The word Trinity is not a biblical term, just as the word benediction is not in the Bible. But just as there are benedictions throughout the Bible, so the reality of the Trinity is found all throughout the Scripture. Simply stated, the doctrine of the Trinity states that there is one God who eternally exists in Three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We don't believe that there are three Gods, or that there is one God who appears in three forms. We believe there is one God who eternally exists in Three Persons. I had two Jehovah Witnesses who came to my house the other day, and we sort of got into it on this subject.

But I can tell you that the evidence for the Trinity is everywhere in the Bible, even in the way the Bible opens. The first words of the Bible say, In the beginning, God created. The singular form of the word God in the Hebrew is the term El. For example, the word Bethel in the Old Testament comes from the word Beth, or house, and –el, which is the Hebrew word for God. So Bethel means “House of God.”

El is singular. But in Genesis 1:1, the noun God is not El (the singular version), but Elohim, the plural version. And yet the singular verb is used for “created.” So the verse literally reads, The plural God, He created.... By extension, we can say, “The Trinity, He created.” God is three persons who eternal exist as one God.

In this first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1, the plural term Elohim is used 31 times. It is used more than 500 times in the first five books of the Bible, and it occurs more than 5000 times throughout the entire Old Testament. Without exception in the Old Testament, this word is used with a singular verb. The plural God, He did this or that.

And there are other hints about the Trinity in the first chapter of the Bible. We read in verse 2 that the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters that comprised the surface of the earth. And down in verse 26, God used the plural pronoun when He said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness....”

I don't have time to trace the unfolding of this doctrine throughout the Old Testament, but it becomes very distinctive in the New Testament. When the Gospel of Matthew opens, for example, one of the first scenes is the baptism of Christ. Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. There you had the entire Trinity showing up for the event. God the Son was baptized. God the Father spoke from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son,” and God the Spirit descended from heaven in the form of a dove.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus gave His Great Commission, He sent us forth to baptize our converts in the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

And here in 2 Corinthians 13, we're told that God the Son wants to bless us with grace, God the Father with love, and God the Holy Spirit with fellowship.

In one of his books, Dr. R. C. Sproul says he once attended a lecture in which a philosophy professor ridiculed Christianity because of the doctrine of the Trinity. How can there be one God and three Gods at the same time in the same relationship? That violates the laws of non-contradiction. But as Sproul points out, “To say that God is one in essence and three in person is not a contradiction. It violates no rule of reason.” He went on to say that if the church declared that God was one in essence and three in essence or one in person or three in person at the same time and in the same sense, then the formulation would be contradictory and thus falsified. But that's not what we're saying. God is one in essence and three in person. “It remains a profound mystery to us,” said Sproul. “But it is not a contradiction.” (R. C. Sproul, *The Invisible Hand* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), see pp. 80-85.)

I've found that it's important to keep in mind the difference between a contradiction and a mystery. A contradiction is defined by the classic rules of logic. The law of non-contradiction states that something cannot be what it is and not be what it is at the same time and in the same sense. A mystery, on the other hand, is something that is true but which we do not fully understand.

I don't understand how Jesus Christ can be both God and Man. I don't understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human free will. But these things do not, in themselves, violate the laws of logic, and they do not constitute contradiction, but mysteries.

It doesn't bother me in the least to have some "mystery" amid my Christian beliefs. In fact, it would bother me if I didn't. Why would I want to worship a God I could totally figure out? Why would I want to serve a God who isn't transcendent? Mysterious? Awe-inspiring? Mind-boggling?

Some doctrines are so deep that I can only state them, accept them, rejoice in them, and study them out as well as I can in Scripture; but I can't get to the bottom of them any more than I could jump out of a boat and swim to the bottom of the ocean.

There's a famous old story about St. Augustine, that he was walking along the seashore and saw a little boy digging a hole in the sand. "What are you doing?" asked Augustine. The little boy replied, "I'm making a hole. I'm going to drain the ocean into my hole."

As Augustine continued his walk, he mulled that over. "So that boy thinks he is going to empty the ocean into the little hole he's digging. Well, that's like being a theologian and thinking I can encompass the infinitude of God within the small limits of my brain."

And so we have two basic assumptions in this Apostolic Benediction. First, God wants to bless us; and second, that blessing comes from the Trinitarian God—each member of the Godhead wants to bless us.

A. Jesus Christ Wants to Bless Us with Grace

First, Jesus wants to bless us with grace. The verse says: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ... be with you all. The word "grace" is one of the best-known words in the Christian vocabulary. It's the translation of the Greek word *charis*, and there are several layers of meaning. It was used in secular Greek writings during biblical times, and it had the basic meaning of something that delights. That's the original meaning of *charis*: Something that brings joy. In Plato's writings, for example, it was used to mean good pleasure, goodwill, favor, pleasure, something that pleases.

As time went by, it was particularly used to describe the favor shown by rulers. When a king or governor presented someone with a gracious gift, this word was used. Suppose, for example, you were invited to the White House and during your tour you visited the President in the Oval Office and he gave you a gift—maybe an ink pen that had been used to sign an important peace treaty or a signed copy of one of his speeches—you'd be delighted and you would treasure it. In the ancient world, that word *charis* would be used to describe these gifts and the benevolence of those who bestowed them.

Well, the apostles and the writers of the New Testament took this word and packed it full of great theological meaning. In fact, J. I. Packer says in his book, *God's Words*: "Rightly understood, this one word 'grace' contains within itself the whole of New Testament theology.... Grace is the sum and substance of New Testament faith. The thought of grace...is the key that unlocks the New Testament; and it is the only key that does it." (J. I. Packer, *God's Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), pp. 94-95.)

Grace is the basis of justification, and also the source of all our other benefits. Someone said that it's the heart and the hand of God. There's an old acronym that can't be beat. It's easy to remember and it is theologically and doctrinally accurate:

G – God's
R – Riches
A – At
C – Christ's
E – Expense

So 2 Corinthians 13:14 tells us that Jesus Christ wants to pour more and more of His grace into our lives.

B. God the Father Wants to Bless Us with Love

The second stanza of this benediction tells us that God wants to bless us with His love. A lot of people don't realize this. Several years ago, I read a book by Tex Sample, who works with what he calls "hard-living people"—alcoholics, addicts, the unemployed, the violent, the deeply troubled, street people. He told of one young man named Matt who was trying to believe in God, but he also claimed to be hearing other voices that he thought came from Satan. These were threatening voices, voices that told him he was going to die and terrified him. A Christian worker sat down with Matt and empathized with his problems, telling him that God loved him and understood how hard it was to believe. He told him that because of Jesus, God actually experienced how hard it is to live in

this world, and that sometimes even Jesus heard the voice of Satan. Suddenly Matt leaned forward and asked, "Do you really believe that? Nobody ever told me that before. I thought God must think I'm really bad. Does God really know how bad it is?" (Tex Sample, *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 72.)

Well, yes. He knows and He cares and He loves. There's an old song that says:

The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never,
I nothing lack if I am His
And He is mine forever.

C. God the Spirit Wants to Bless Us with Fellowship

There's a debate among scholars about what this means. Is He talking about our fellowship with the Holy Spirit? Or about the fellowship the Holy Spirit gives to the church? Most commentators think Paul is referring to the unity and fellowship we have with one another in the church and in our homes because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our midst. It is the individual indwelling and fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit that makes possible the fellowship of the church. It is through the grace and the cross of Jesus Christ that we come to see the love of God and experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. God wants to give you unity with your friends, in your home, and with your family and church.

Recently while I was in West Virginia with my friend, Dave Tosi, we ate breakfast in the town diner. It was a wonderful little restaurant with home-cooked meals and the pancakes were just the way I like them. While we ate, the old man who owned the restaurant came and sat with us. He said he had been running the restaurant for many years, that he had taken it over from his parents.

"When I was a young man," he said, "I went off to the army and fought in Korea. When I returned home, I became the town drunk. Every night I'd get drunk in the streets and bars, and every morning I'd sleep it off, and I just about killed my parents with worry. Then one day my brother was in a public restroom and he saw a Gospel tract lying there. He read it, and because of that simple tract in the restroom, he became a Christian. His life was really changed, and it had an impact on me. Because of that, I went to a revival meeting, then to another one, and I, too, gave my life to the Lord Jesus Christ. I was changed at once, and now many years later, we have Bible studies every week in this restaurant and I run it for the glory of God."

I was just amazed at his story because it demonstrated the incredible grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and His ability to change our lives, even by a Gospel tract left in a public restroom.

Are you sure you know Christ as your Savior. If you would die today, are you ready to meet God? The Lord wants to bless you. God the Father wants to bless you. God the Son wants to bless you. And God the Spirit wants to bless you. And today I invite you to Him.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.