

Route Sixty-Six

Part Forty-Seven

2 Corinthians

A Quill Dipped in Tears

(John 5:39; 2 Corinthians 12:15)

With Study Questions

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8/30/2020*

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And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved (2 Corinthians 12:15).

Introduction

At the risk of being found out, I will offer some truths when it comes to my role as a minister. These truths may not be accurate for other ministers, but form an exposé of my personal experience. I was hesitant to enter into full-time ministry. I have had two positions (three if you include my short stint with Athletes in Action, a branch of Campus Crusade for Christ) in the past forty years. I did not seek either of them. A local church asked me to be their youth pastor and I said 'no'. But, to quote a famous theologian, they made me an offer I couldn't refuse. It went fairly well.

Then, a little over thirty years ago, I was approached to take post of pastor at this church. Again, I said 'no', and again, they catered to my clear weaknesses and hesitations. The one response I recalled in these negotiations was when I said (due to my great respect for the man who I would succeed) "Don't expect much."

This is not to say I had no heart for the ministry. At a young age I developed a passion for the Scriptures—for the truth! I liked (maybe even loved) the truth. But I wasn't all that crazy about people. Now, I don't want to overstate this. I liked people. I cared about people. At the same time, when compared to the truth of Christ and His word — people were (I am staring at my keyboard in hesitation) — people were expendable.

I guess there can be some noble way of spinning this.

Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue;⁴³ for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:42, 43).

My job was to tell the truth according to the Scriptures (it still is). It wasn't all that difficult for me to put relationships on the line for the sake of the truth. After all, **"Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Proverbs 27:6)**. As time marched on this became emotionally more difficult. This is both the beauty and the pain of living in one community your entire life and being in one church.

You marry a couple then, all of the sudden, you're doing the wedding of one of their children! You sit in the ashes through the death of a loved one or the demise of a relationship or some severe, or joyous event! As a young man and young pastor, I had not been psychologically or spiritually woven in such a way as to immediately love or care. But spending time (a serious type of time) with people yields both love and care. As does age.

Now I feel with members of our church similar to the way I feel with my own children (fathers and brothers is a common name, designating presbyters). I want them to know and embrace the truth. I desire that they be wise, good, faithful and loving. I have a responsibility to confront and offer words that I fear may not be well received. There is the potentiality of alienation.

But the feeling that members of our church are expendable has flown the coop. And even new members or visitors with whom I have not the intense history, easily win a place in my heart as newly adopted member of the household. When one dedicates their life to the community of Christ, there is a great risk of getting emotionally involved.

I don't think I am speaking merely for myself. This same experience can be said of the elders (some of whom don't take as long as I for this emotional investment). It can be said of the deacons as well. I can be said of the staff, the Sunday school teachers, the youth workers, the worship leaders. In truth, I think it can be said of anyone who determines to make a ministerial/fellowship investment in the lives of their brothers and sisters in Christ in their church. This is why it can be so difficult for people to move. If, at some level, it doesn't break your heart to leave your church, you may have not made that investment.

Perhaps you will not think this introduction odd when I proffer that Second Corinthians is an epistle of pathos. Yes, it contains valuable doctrine. But it was said to have been written by a "quill dipped in tears." The Apostle Paul dances in this letter between being encouraged by this church's repentance, while simultaneously having the unenviable task of

defending himself from a small but powerful minority who had taken aim at him morally, theologically and personally.

Survey of Second Corinthians

As we survey this epistle, we note how the protagonist of this ministerial revolt does not wallow in pity. Instead, he places his focus upon the deepest source of comfort, while remaining ministerial on the utility of his battle.

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).

Being loved and comforted by God should not form a cul-de-sac in our souls. God shines in that we may shine out. A few chapters later Paul will write:

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Paul does rejoice in their repentance. Although it would appear that their course of action was still laden with weakness and immaturity. In First Corinthians Paul had chastised them for their willingness to allow incestuous sin to go unchecked (1 Corinthians 5:1). And though there is legitimate question as to whether he is speaking of the same issue, he now encourages the church to receive back the repentant sinner.

so that, on the contrary, you *ought* rather to forgive and comfort *him*, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:7).

Sometimes the biggest violators are the least forgiving. The lack of willingness to forgive is a very dangerous attribute for those who call

themselves Christians (Matthew 6:15). Good and bad reactions from within and without would not deter Paul from heralding the knowledge of God in every place. He rejoiced in being “**the fragrance of Christ**” (2 Corinthians 2:15). He did this knowing the reactions to this fragrance would be dramatically different among listeners.

To the one [the perishing] *we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other [the saved] the aroma of life leading to life* (2 Corinthians 2:16a).

The responses will vary, the fragrance should never.

Let us beware, the antagonists to the ministry are often within the church, with the Scriptures in their hands. Those who read the Scriptures while dismissing, rejecting or deemphasizing Christ, read as if blinded and obfuscated.

But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. 15 But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. 16 Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away (2 Corinthians 3:14-16).

May God grant us the grace to behold the glory of the Lord with an unveiled face.

A recurring theme in this epistle, along with divine comfort, is God’s strength manifested in human weakness. In part, Paul is answering the accusation that his difficulties must have meant faulty theology on his part. But he teaches a lesson we must ever relearn, that God often works counter-intuitively.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. ⁸ *We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed – ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ For we who live are always*

delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Corinthians 4:7-11 see also 6:3-9).

It is no easy task to achieve contentment in this approach to life. The world so surrounds and consumes us. An old saying suggests that a person can be "so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good." Paul did not seem to embrace that adage. It would appear that even the joy of ministry blanched when compared to his eternal hope.

We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

And Paul's (truly the Holy Spirit's) effort to ensure that this blessed hope and comfort be in the souls of those he sought to shepherd, he never strays from viewing Christ, and all others, with heavenly eyes. It may be argued that the conflicts in their church, the conflicts within all churches, and (dare I say) the racial conflicts which plague all the world, would find a cure if we excelled at appropriating this simple, yet seemingly impossible, passage.

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him thus* no longer.¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:16, 17).

He will go on to explain the very heart of the gospel that these beautiful promises might be ours. There may not be a single verse in all of Scripture which captures the gospel so powerfully and succinctly.

For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

On the cross the Father accounted Christ accursed that we might be accounted righteous. There is no better news!

Yet this Corinthians church had been “**restricted by [their] own affections**” (2 Corinthians 6:12). The world had undue influence upon them, and they were warned against being “**unequally yoked**” and coming out from the sway and pull of the world (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Again, Paul is moving between joy and chastisement. He does not wish to overwhelm them with harsh correction nor through negligence leave their sins unchecked. In his concern of how they might sorrow in his corrections, he defines and distinguishes two types of sorrow.

For godly sorrow produces repentance *leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death* (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Both Peter and Judas had sorrow, but with dramatically different outcomes.

Paul will spend some time on the offerings they would give for the poorer Jerusalem churches. Not to spend a great deal of time here. It is worth noting a distinction Paul makes from his first epistle to Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 9:8, while addressing subsidizing those who preach the gospel, he appeals to the law.

Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain” (1 Corinthians 9:8, 9).

Those who served in the temple were the model in terms of how the preacher was to receive income—it was a tithe (a tenth). In 2 Corinthians (addressing an offering for the poorer churches) he seems to say just the opposite.

I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others (2 Corinthians 8:8).

In chapter ten Paul makes a noticeable detour in his emphasis. So much so, that some have thought (without due merit) that chapters ten through thirteen was a different epistle entirely.

It is in chapter ten that Paul points out how different the spiritual war is. Herein lies a flagship passage for those who hold to presuppositional apologetics.

For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, ⁵ casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5).

In this spiritual warfare, Paul seems less concerned with making arguments to defend his God than with casting down the self-exalting arguments of others.

In chapter eleven Paul engages in the unenviable task of defending himself against the charges of false apostles. To this day, red flags fly upon encountering anyone who presents themselves with the moniker of apostle.

In chapter twelve Paul continues his defense by appealing to having been caught up into the third heaven-into Paradise where “**heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter**” (2 Corinthians 12:4b). So glorious was this that a “**thorn in the flesh was**” given to him to keep him humble (2 Corinthians 12:7b). We learn here that even messengers of Satan come ultimately from the hand of God for our good. It is here we learn that God’s grace is sufficient.

Paul continues his defense by reminding them that he had displayed the supernatural signs of an apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12). Something that never happens now that the canon of Scripture is closed.

Paul will conclude by stating something from which he seldom strays-the gospel.

For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you (2 Corinthians 13:4).

And it is with loving and pastoral concern that he exhorts his readers to “**examine**” themselves as to whether they are in the faith-a healthy practice for us all.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss what you believe to be the valuable attributes of those who seek to minister and why (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some risks you take when you seek to love and minister to others (pages 3, 4)?
3. From where should we seek comfort in trying times? What should we do, having received that comfort (page 4)?
4. What did the Apostle Paul mean by the fragrance of Christ? Discuss his use of that term (page 5).
5. How is God's strength manifested through human weakness (pages 5, 6)?
6. What does it mean to regard no one according to the flesh (page 6)?
7. How is the gospel captured in 2 Corinthians 5:21 (page 6)?
8. Contrast godly sorrow with worldly sorrow (page 7).
9. How does one examine as to whether or not they are in the faith (page 8)?