



Bible Study

2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 1

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was to answer questions that had been put to him by them. The second letter was more personal, where Paul explains in a humble way, some of the pressures and difficulties that he faced in ministry.

Introduction

Paul indicates that his apostleship was in the will of God and that he was working at this time, with Timothy. He had a number of people with whom he ministered and he undoubtedly sought God's wisdom as to who to send to which place. Paul describes God's people as holy and, therefore, set aside exclusively for Him.

Paul always desired grace and peace to be the experience of God's people, in contrast to the legalism and strife that so often tries to disrupt church life.

The God of All Comfort

At some time or other, we all need God's comfort and Paul was no exception. He describes God the Father as the father of compassion and the God of all comfort. This comfort, therefore, is very personal and comes from the heart. It is not platitudes or empty words but it is solid, reliable and consistent.

We do not know the details of why Paul needed comfort but it seems to be very much linked with the persecution and trials that he encountered in his work of bringing the gospel to the unsaved.

Suffering for Christ

Paul knew what it was to suffer for Christ but he also knew the comfort of God. Paul encourages believers to comfort one another with the comfort of God. He was confident that others who shared in the sufferings of Christ, would also share in the comfort of Christ.

Paul reveals that he and his companions felt close to death during their time in Asia and wondered whether they would survive. However, God delivered them and Paul declares his continuing hope in God's deliverance. He came through those trials and believed that, if necessary, he could come through them again. He saw his trials in a positive way, as opportunities to trust God rather than himself. The key factor in his survival, he states, were the prayers of many of the saints. The power of prayer is extremely important and we must never underestimate the impact of our prayers, when we call upon God for others.

Paul's Change of Plans

Paul sought to plan his missionary work and, indeed, things often happened according to those plans. However, there were times when things had to change.

Paul was keen to maintain his integrity. He desired to be reliable, to speak the truth and to fulfil all of his commitments. He had fully planned a return visit to Corinth and desired to be straightforward in his dealings with God's people. He wanted to be clear and not to confuse, because he was confident that that was the way of Christ. "Yes" means yes and "No" means no.

God's Promises and Anointing

God has given us many promises and He will not forget any of them. Every one of them is backed by His love and integrity. The presence of God in our lives is a confirmation that He owns us and that we belong to Him. God's Holy Spirit is a guarantor and a deposit of so much more to come.

Paul's Decision

It seems that Paul knew that it would be a difficult time when he visited the Corinthians again and that, maybe, some more confrontation would be needed. Paul, himself, was always willing to do that but he appears to have sensed that a delay might give them the opportunity to sort themselves out without his intervention. His motivation in ministry to the church was not about exercising power and dictating to them but a genuine desire that they might all know the joy of the Lord and stand firm in their faith.

Points to Consider:

1. How do you relate to God's people and help them to receive the comfort of God?
2. How do we handle suffering for Christ?
3. How often do you pray for Christians who are going through trials?
4. When we share with God's people, how much effort do we make to avoid confusion and a lack of clarity?
5. To what extent do we trust in the promises of God and seek the guidance of His Spirit when handling difficult situations?
6. Consider your motives for ministry. Do you desire the best outcome for God's people or do you just think about yourself?

2 Corinthians 2

This chapter reminds us of the challenges that Paul faced in his relationship with the Corinthian Christians. Paul has addressed some difficult issues but not everyone has understood what he is saying and why he is saying it. He handles the issue of forgiveness and encourages the Christians to exemplify the character of Christ in the midst of very difficult circumstances.

Paul's Anguish

Paul knew that he had to confront serious matters but wants God's people to know that he shed many tears and spoke the words that he did, not to cause pain but because of his great love for them. He does have joy in doing what was right but the delivery of his message was a hard thing for him to do.

Dealing with the Offender

It is likely that the problem to which Paul is referring, is the incident of sexual sin, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. Having stated that the incident was sinful and that the punishment to exclude the person from the church for a season was appropriate and necessary, he now wants to move on. If there has been repentance, there should now be forgiveness and a willingness to restore that person into fellowship.

God's forgiveness is remarkable and generous to those who truly repent. We must be also willing to forgive, in the same way that the Lord has forgiven us.

The Schemes of Satan

Paul helps us to understand that our enemy, Satan, is thorough, strategic and deceitful in all his ways. He loves to lead us into sin and to trap us in the consequences of our disobedience. However, Satan also wants God's people to be arrogant, proud and self-righteous. These attitudes can be as destructive as the sins they condemn. Therefore, we must walk very carefully with humble hearts, being alert to the enemy's agenda!

Discovering God's Will

Paul sought the Lord to be in the right place to preach the Gospel. He valued his partners and friends in the ministry and he particularly mentions Titus. The way that Paul valued his colleagues is very significant. Like us, he needed their support and their love.

God's Victory

In verse 14, Paul is referring to the way that a Roman army, returning from a victory, would march into the city. There would be a great welcome as the army arrived and captives and trophies from their victory would be displayed. Paul is picturing the victory that Christ has won over sin and death. Christ marched into heaven in triumph and we, freed from our sins, follow him into that place where there is no sin, sorrow or death! We are on display, not in shame but as trophies of his grace and goodness to us.

The Aroma of Christ

Where there is death and suffering, there can often be very unpleasant smells that greatly disturb those who experience them. However, there is also the sweet smell that comes out of a good and healthy situation. Those of us who believe in Christ, are able to have a strong influence, which can deeply affect those around us. We are the fragrance of Christ, which is life and health to those who believe in him, but for those who reject Christ, it is the smell of their death and eternal separation from God!

Motives for Preaching the Gospel

Paul concludes this chapter, declaring that the purpose of his ministry is not for personal gain or profit. Paul is conscious that his ministry is always done in the sight and presence of God and, therefore, he knows that he has been sent by God and must speak with sincerity and integrity.

Points to Consider:

1. How do we respond when we have to confront sin in the Church? Are we able to bring careful correction without fear or favour?
2. How willing are we to forgive those who have brought dishonour to the body of Christ?
3. Are we alert to the schemes of Satan and how do we avoid falling into the traps that he sets?
4. Do we truly value those whom God has given to work alongside us?
5. How aware are we of the great victory that Christ has won for us and the effect that this has upon those around us?
6. Do we share a strong testimony of Christ to others and are we careful to watch our motives for sharing the Gospel?

2 Corinthians 3

Paul has a real heart for the Christians in Corinth. He is aware that some of the leaders have questions about him but his desire is that they should know the hope that there is in the risen Christ, the freedom that there is in Christ and the glory that there is in Christ.

Letters of Recommendation

It is wise to be discerning about people who come to the church, because some can be a blessing and some can be destructive. One way of helping this process, was the practice of having a letter from your church, recommending you to another church. The motive for this was good and intended to protect the church. However, it could sometimes be heavy-handed or oppressive. Paul contends that our lives should be a letter and that God's Spirit at work within us will commend us as being genuine in Christ. Paul did not need a letter of recommendation, because his life and ministry spoke powerfully of his relationship with God. He was a respected minister of the Gospel because of God's work in his life. He states that he is a minister of a New Covenant. The New Covenant does not ignore the law of God but rejoices in the grace of God, which means that we are accepted in Christ, even though we fall short of God's standards.

The New Covenant

The Old Covenant was engraved in letters on stone, when Moses received the Ten Commandments and the glory of God was seen on the face of Moses. This was a key moment in the life of Israel, because the Ten Commandments revealed the character of God and His standards which, if his people obeyed them, would make them very distinctive from other nations. However, this righteous law also revealed how sinful the human heart is and how desperate we are for God's mercy. Paul is writing about the New Covenant, which brings righteousness and freedom from sin. The glory which shone out of Jesus, is also able to shine out of us!

Our Position in Christ

We are able to be full of hope and to be very bold, because of what Jesus has done for us. We are able to have a personal relationship with God, we can be in His presence and we do not require a veil to cover our faces, because Christ removes every barrier which would separate us from God. The Spirit of the Lord has touched our hearts and brought us into a wonderful freedom before God. We know that we are sinners but the grace of God means that we can enter His presence and in His presence, we are being changed and made more like Him. The glory of the believer can never come from self-effort or any human plan but, rather, it comes from Jesus himself. What Paul is presenting here is a life-changing experience. The closer we get to Jesus, the more we become like him and, therefore, the more other people will see Jesus in us.

Points to Consider:

1. What precautions do you take when welcoming new people into your church?
2. What qualifications are you looking for, before receiving someone as a member of your church?
3. What part did the Old Covenant play in God's purposes to bring us to Christ?
4. How much do we enjoy the freedom that the New Covenant brings and how do we avoid legalism?
5. What can we do to receive more of the glory of God in our lives, knowing that when we get to heaven, the glory will be overwhelming?

2 Corinthians 4

In this chapter, Paul expresses his commitment to the gospel and shares that the light of the gospel will shine through the lives of believers, regardless of the enemy's schemes. Despite our human frailty, he is convinced that, through weak human vessels, the life of Christ conquers the power of death. Once again, he speaks confidently about the eternal weight of glory to come, which enables us to rise above the challenges that we wrestle with in this life.

The Ministry of the New Covenant

It is a ministry granted by the mercy of God, to proclaim Christ as the bringer of a new way to God. Paul is committed to preaching the word of God with no frills or compromise. The world seeks to get its messages across in all sorts of underhand, deceitful ways but we do not need to resort to that. True ministers of the gospel have a clear conscience. We humbly share the truth and encourage people to get right with God.

The Veiled Gospel

The truth that Christ died, rose from the dead and one day will return is, for many people, hidden from their eyes. The gospel is real but it appears lifeless until that revelation which comes from God, dawns upon the unbelieving soul. Paul says that the devil has blinded people from seeing the light of the gospel. What an incredible privilege it is for us, who were once blind but now can see how much the Lord loves us and that he has given himself for us. So many of the Jews could not see that Christ is the Messiah. However, because Paul knew that Christ had opened his eyes, he believed that Christ would also open the eyes of others.

The Gospel that we Proclaim

This gospel is not our gospel but the Lord's gospel. We are servants of Jesus Christ. He is Lord. He is God who became man for us. The One who spoke at creation and brought light into the darkness, wants to speak into our spiritual darkness and bring His light. Paul's reference to the face of Jesus is very important. Look at the description John gives in Revelation 1:16. Jesus' face is light, it is glorious, it is powerful beyond measure but one day, we shall see his face and worship him!

Human Weakness and Persecution

Both of these challenges take their toll. Paul's picture of the jars of clay is very thought-provoking. The jars contain great treasure but they are vulnerable. However, Paul does not see this as wholly negative but, rather, rejoices that the power and glory of God can be

manifest, despite the weaknesses that are apparent. His description of the afflictions of believers would be quite alarming, were it not for the clear message that suffering and persecution were also part of Jesus' experience. Jesus is with us and he will take us through these valleys of suffering and persecution. Jesus was raised from the dead and he will bring us safely through life's storms to be with him for ever!

Our Confidence in Christ

Paul is confident that our risen Saviour will see us through. Though our bodies are becoming frail, our spirit is being renewed daily. In the light of eternity, the trials that we face now for being faithful to Jesus in a hostile world, will seem as nothing compared to the eternal glory that awaits us. Therefore, we fix our eyes upon eternal things - namely Christ and the victory that he has won for us!

Points to Consider:

1. Why is it so important for us to clearly proclaim that we are under a new covenant?
2. The gospel is veiled and the enemy blinds people to the truth. How can we seek to change this and challenge the work of the enemy, so that people can see who Jesus really is?
3. The gospel is light. How do we seek to overcome darkness in the world?
4. The obstacles that Paul faced were great. What obstacles have you faced as a believer and how did you overcome them?
5. What are the grounds for Paul's confidence that we do not lose heart?

2 Corinthians 5

Paul shares three key themes in this chapter. Firstly, he describes the anticipation that we will one day leave this body and be with Christ for ever. Secondly, he reminds us that we will all be accountable to God for what we do in this life. Thirdly, he talks about God's great gift of reconciling us to Himself in Christ, which motivates our desire to proclaim Christ to others, so that they too might be reconciled to God.

The Earthly Tent

The mortal body that each of us has been given, is like a tent that our spirit lives in. A tent is not intended to be a permanent home and our bodies, though they are a precious gift from God, will not last for ever. As Christians, we recognise that our eternal home is with the Lord in heaven and that we are required to live trusting God, who we cannot see, rather than trusting in what we can see. However, when we receive Christ as Saviour and Lord, we are given the Holy Spirit as a deposit, a guarantee that something wonderful is ahead of us!

The Holy Spirit

The gift of the Holy Spirit, gives us the confidence that we need to serve God on this earth. Paul's relationship with Jesus was very secure. He looked forward with great anticipation but while he was still in his mortal body, he was content to live for Christ and wait for the time when he would be at home with the Lord for eternity.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

As believers, we have been rescued from eternal condemnation. Jesus has dealt with that and given us the promise that we will be with him in heaven. However, we need to understand that we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, to receive what is due to us for the things that we have done. We have some information as to what this actually means, because the Bible tells us that, after having received Christ as our Saviour, how we live and what we do will be important. We cannot say, "I am saved and so, nothing matters about how I live!" We have been given a great gift and we must not take our salvation for granted, How we treat others, how we care for our bodies, our actions and our reactions, are all known to God and we need to think very carefully about these things. Our good deeds will be seen for what they are, as well as our mistakes. In other scripture passages, Paul speaks of receiving a reward and God is faithful. Jesus wants to say to all of us, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Fear of the Lord

Paul's understanding of being accountable to God, was inspired by a godly fear of the Lord. This means that he had great respect for his Saviour and realised that he needed to honour the one who had died for him. However, Paul also had a strong desire for other believers to receive good things from the Lord. Part of his care for his brothers and sisters in Christ, was to encourage them to do well in their Christian lives. He was not content for people to simply profess that they had received Christ - he wanted people to grow and mature as Christians!

Paul was inspired by the fear of the Lord and had a great compassion for believers but, overwhelmingly, he was motivated by the love of Christ. Christ's sacrificial love for us is so inspirational. If he, as Almighty God, was willing to become a man and sacrifice his life for us, our response has to be the desire to live for him and not for ourselves!

Ambassadors for Christ

When we come to know Christ, we look at life in a very different way and we become entirely new people because of him. Our old life has gone, we have peace with God and we have become His friends. We have been reconciled into a relationship, whereby we are forgiven and accepted by a holy and great God. And now, we want others to know the same relationship with God that we have discovered.

We are Christ's ambassadors and he has given us the ministry of reconciliation. In this, we represent him. Because of his work on the cross for us, we long for people to know him, to have their sins forgiven and to be considered righteous in his sight. God has done everything to make this possible, therefore it is for us to humble ourselves and receive His grace.

Points to Consider:

1. How ready are we for the time when we will be with the Lord and how seriously do we take the fact that we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ?
2. How well do we care for the body that we have been given?
3. Are we living with a consciousness that we are new creations in Christ?
4. We are ambassadors for Christ. What is it that motivates you to win others for Jesus?
5. How much do we appreciate the great sacrifice of Jesus to reconcile us to God?

2 Corinthians 6

In this chapter, Paul continues to urge us to embrace the grace of God and to live the new life, which enables us to be ambassadors for Christ. He appeals for his Corinthian brothers and sisters to open wide their hearts, to receive the ministry that God has given him for them. There is also strong advice about the need for us to avoid idolatry and not to be entangled by the world.

The Day of Salvation

God's call is timely. He has reached out to save us in His time and plan and, right now, we live in a time of God's favour, when the door to receive Christ is wide open. Now is the time to respond to the gospel and we dare not let anyone put off acceptance of Christ, because we don't know when that door will close!

Paul's Anguish

Paul was deeply concerned for the Corinthians and shares in much the same way as in his letter to the Galatians. He was committed to ministry that had integrity and he describes the trials and difficulties that he has faced. He and his fellow-workers had suffered much for faithfully preaching the gospel and he strongly refutes any idea that his ministry was about personal gain or glory. He talks about beatings, imprisonment and getting caught up in riots, as well as about hard work, sleepless nights and hunger. Humbly, he says that they have sought to exercise purity, understanding, patience and kindness, seeking the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to witness to Christ in truth and love. He describes this as warfare, where he uses God's weapons of righteousness in both hands. He knows that some will give a bad report but this does not dissuade him from serving Christ. These are incredibly difficult times but despite everything, he rejoices in Christ and knows that, in Christ, he has all that he really needs.

Paul speaks plainly about the coldness of the Corinthians towards himself and his fellow-workers. He declares their genuine affection for the Corinthians and pleads for the Corinthians to respond with open hearts towards them. It is likely that Paul speaks so strongly about the sacrificial challenges of his ministry, because he knows that there is a form of ministry which is self-centred, lazy and seeks a comfortable life focused upon self-interest, rather than selflessly caring for those who Christ loves.

Worldly Entanglement

In the final part of this chapter, Paul addresses the sensitive issue of relationships between believers and unbelievers. The values of the world in which he lived, would have been in very stark contrast to the lifestyle, morals and beliefs of a Christian. That is also true for us

today. The Bible calls for us to be different to the world because, if a believer or a church is under the control or influence of an unbeliever or an organisation with worldly standards of behaviour, there is a risk that their faith and witness may be crushed. However, we must also remember that Jesus encourages us to be salt and light in our world, so we must exercise wisdom to develop healthy relationships with unbelievers, knowing that the light of Christ in us can bring them to Christ!

Points to Consider:

1. How much do we appreciate the grace of God and realise that today is the day of salvation?
2. What are the values that are evident from our life and ministry?
3. To what extent is our ministry motivated by our love for Jesus and his church, rather than our own self-interest?
4. How clearly do we teach that someone coming to Christ must abandon their old beliefs and lifestyle?
5. How careful are we to prevent our relationships in this world from crushing our faith in Christ?

2 Corinthians 7

We know how vital relationships are in the body of Christ. In his letters, Paul is full of love for the church, so he is greatly concerned about a substantial challenge in his relationship with the Corinthian church. In this chapter, he explains that his motives for bringing correction are driven by his commitment to them. He also believes that they are committed to him but there is a need for certain issues to be made clear. He has a great desire for things to be right between them.

A Call to Holiness

Paul issues a call for all Christians to seek purity and holiness, particularly since we have been promised so much in Christ.

Paul's Heart

Paul expresses that his motives have been pure in all that he has said and written. In fact, he has much to thank God for regarding the Corinthians and is in a place of comfort and joy before God concerning them. In Macedonia, he and his companions had faced many obstacles and he talks about outer conflict, as well as inner struggles. He was so encouraged by the coming of Titus, who brought a report which conveyed a comforting sense of the Corinthians' concern for Paul as well as for Titus.

Paul's First Letter

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul spoke strongly concerning reports of immorality and quarreling among the believers. Paul knew that the content of his letter had grieved them but he does not believe that he had written anything wrong. However, it is likely that his decisive teaching had offended many of them. Nevertheless, Titus' visit had re-affirmed their respect and concern for Paul and demonstrated that there had been repentance and a change of heart towards him.

Godly Sorrow

Paul comments on their godly sorrow. Worldly sorrow grieves and is painful but it has no value and it brings no peace. Godly sorrow produces a genuine change of heart which leads to deliverance and peace. The whole purpose of sharing truth is that those who receive it can realise where their relationships with God and others are wrong and seek to put matters right. This process of godly sorrow, though it can be painful, produces joy and restoration. The lack of it, produces bitterness and separation.

Titus

We have already mentioned Titus but we need to see what a thoroughly able and godly man he was. He spoke with authority. He was able to bless the Corinthians and help them understand what Paul was saying and he was also able to bring comfort to Paul. As a human being, Paul had been affected by this dispute and was grateful for the ministry of Titus in speaking up for Paul in this crisis. Paul's faith in Titus to be a faithful and true ambassador, was justified and had resulted in a difficult situation being healed. The Corinthians may have feared that Titus would come with another heavy word but he handled the situation with wisdom and righteousness and he won their hearts!

Points to Consider:

1. How can we develop a heart for God and His people? What hinders us from having a good heart?
2. Are we willing to confront issues, even when we may get a bad reaction?
3. When necessary, do we exercise godly sorrow and a genuine desire to change or are we only sorry because we have been caught?
4. Are we willing to admit that there are times when we feel depressed or low or do we feel that we cannot admit to such things?
5. How would you describe the role of Titus? Is there someone for whom you need to be a 'Titus'?

2 Corinthians 8

Early on in his ministry, Paul had agreed with the apostles, James, Peter and John, that he would remember the poor (*Galatians 2:10*). The background of this chapter is that there had been a famine and Paul had urged the churches to respond, by making an offering which he could collect when he visited the churches.

The Macedonian Churches

Paul commends the Macedonian churches for their generous response to his appeal to help the poor. Paul understood that these churches also had considerable need but this did not stop them from responding sacrificially to the situation. The attitude of these people was remarkable. They did not consider giving a burden and they wanted to participate and help where they could.

Paul writes that the Macedonians did not do as he and his companions expected but gave themselves first to the Lord and then to others, in keeping with God's will. This was a very powerful statement. The people believed that the first rule of giving, was to give to God. A right relationship with God inspires the desire to give. If we give out of any other motive, it will not yield much blessing but if our attitude to God is right, then He will bless us. The people responded to Paul because they saw how he had given himself to God. He was known as a man who did not want things for himself but for the Lord's work, so people were inspired to give to God and let Paul be the channel through which God would work.

The Grace of Giving

Paul commends the Corinthians for their faith and love and encourages them to excel in the grace of giving. Christian giving is precious and important and it is different to the way the world gives. God's grace is the main motivator for our giving. The more we seek God's grace, the easier it is for us to give to God's work.

The Grace of Christ

Paul now shares a very precious truth concerning the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich! When Jesus left the glory of heaven to come to this earth, it was a tremendous change for him. He was born in a stable; he was born into a nation that was despised and hated; he came to a world that had no electricity or piped water; he shared in the poverty of people in the world at that time and he knows what life is like for those still facing poverty in our world today. However, poverty cannot just be measured in material terms. We were all sinners and spiritually poor, so Jesus became sin for us when he died on the cross. Now, when we trust in him, we become spiritually rich, we are forgiven and we become new creations in Christ!

Generosity

Paul makes the argument that, if Christ could do what he did for us in his coming, then we must be sure, out of gratitude for his forgiveness, to do what we can for others. The generosity of the Corinthians needed to be maintained. This was their time to respond and give but there might come a time when they too would need to be helped by receiving charitable gifts and assistance from others.

Godly principles of giving are not only about having a generous heart ourselves but also about having a heart that is humble and willing to receive when we are in need.

Accountability

Paul again talks about Titus, who he valued very highly. Titus was coming with two faithful brothers in Christ to receive the Corinthians' gifts for the poor. These brothers had been chosen because of their faithful commitment to the gospel and they would work with Paul to administer the gifts in a way that was right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men. These men were serving Christ and they needed to be loved and respected for the work they were doing. They were serving the Lord and not themselves!

Points to Consider:

1. How do we respond to severe need in other parts of the world?
2. What do you think it means to excel in the grace of giving?
3. How thankful are we, for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ?
4. As God's people, how generous are we and how willing are we to give?
5. Paul organised the giving for the poor very well. What can we learn from his approach concerning the way in which we should be accountable to others?

2 Corinthians 9

Paul continues his theme regarding Christian giving. He commends the Corinthians for their eagerness to help and tells how this had stirred others into action. He also gives thanks to God for the indescribable gift of Christ!

Commitment

The Corinthians' enthusiasm to give had been an inspiration to others and Paul had boasted about this to the Macedonians. Now Paul was looking for the Corinthians to honour their promises.

Preparation

Paul was committed to making sure that the Corinthians were properly prepared and ready to provide their gift. He did not want it to be done thoughtlessly or half-heartedly, so it was important to make careful arrangements. The gift was to be carried by trustworthy people, who had the responsibility to collect what had been given and to deliver it to where it was needed. Paul also wanted them to understand that they should not give reluctantly, because God loves a cheerful giver.

Sowing and Reaping

Paul uses a picture of sowing and reaping to illustrate the harvest that comes from giving. Our gifts can be seen as a seed and, when we sow a seed, we are looking for it to grow and bear fruit. God has to be at work in this, because fruit comes from Him and not from us. So our giving has to be to God and not to men. Giving that comes from the heart, brings much blessing.

Paul suggests that, before we give, we should pray and consider carefully before God, what to give. This is a very important decision and we should not be driven by emotion or be careless. We need to be guided by the Lord and, once we have decided what to give, we should not change our minds but we should give it cheerfully and generously.

Cheerful giving comes from the heart and seeks to please the Lord rather than men. There is often sacrifice in cheerful giving but we have confidence that God is able to provide for all our needs. He will not fail us. God wants us to care about the poor so, when we give directly to the poor, we give according to His will. It is also true that the one that provides the seed for the sower will give us even more seed to sow if we are faithful. He who gives to the poor will lack nothing (*Proverbs 28:27*).

God is not impressed by the size of our gifts and giving will never earn our salvation - only what Jesus did on the cross can do that. However, our giving demonstrates our obedience

and the sincerity of our hearts to do God's will. It is righteous to give and our generosity is a practical expression of our thankfulness to God. Paul is very clear that giving is a very important part of our responsibility as Christians!

The Service of Giving

We are able to serve God in many ways. Paul has been making it clear that responsible Christian giving is a way of serving the Lord. This service that we give is able to meet the needs of others but it is much more than that. When we give according to God's leading, then the person who receives will see that this is not only a response from man but also from God. People may be grateful to us but they will also praise God for our generosity. Giving is a sign of our obedience and part of the new life that we have in Christ. It is not like the world, where people give to those who they know will give something back. Christian giving does not expect anything in return. It is inspired by the grace of God and we want to give, because we know how much the Lord has given to us!

The Indescribable Gift

God has given to us most powerfully, the gift of His son. There is no gift that can compare to the gift of Jesus! Jesus was given for our salvation, to bring us to God and to put us on the road to heaven. Hallelujah!

Points to Consider:

1. How careful are we to make sure that the money we give to the Lord's work is properly used?
2. The temptation of money can often lead to unrighteousness within the church. How do we avoid this?
3. Do we carefully think and pray before we give?
4. Do we consider our giving as an obligation or a choice made of our own free will as part of our service to God?
5. The gift of Jesus is the best gift of all. In what practical ways can we express our thanks for this gift?

2 Corinthians 10

In this chapter, the apostle Paul is responding to criticism of his ministry. He teaches about the divine power of the weapons of spiritual warfare and expresses his hope to take the Gospel to places where it has not yet been heard.

Humility and Gentleness

The basis of Paul's defence is his humility and gentleness. Paul is handling the accusations against him, not with anger and defiance but with firm teaching. His humility and gentleness were very much seen in Christ himself and we know that Jesus was falsely accused on many occasions.

The suggestion from Paul's accusers was that, in his letters he was very bold but in face to face confrontation, he was very timid. Of course, it was easy for people who lacked integrity to despise his humility but Paul was committed to consistent Christian living and he would not compromise that. He would always be the same person, whatever the circumstances, because he wanted to please God, not men.

Spiritual Warfare

The criticisms that Paul faced did not simply come from people. They were actually spiritual battles. Disobedience and false accusations are characteristics of the devil and they need to be defeated by using the weapons of spiritual warfare. Having a state of mind that was wholly committed to Christ, Paul talks about demolishing strongholds, arguments and pretensions, so as to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ. His responses to different situations were always to know the will of God and then to act responsibly. However, if there were attitudes and ways of thinking that were contrary to being obedient to Christ, he would challenge them strongly.

Belonging to Christ

Paul speaks about the foolishness of those who commend themselves. He declares that such people, who measure themselves by their own standards, are not wise and he will not compare himself to them. Paul always looked to Jesus and he did not want to exaggerate or understate what it meant for him to belong to Christ. He taught with the goal of bringing maturity to the Body of Christ and his ministry was always aimed at helping people to grow in their faith and love for Jesus.

Moving On

Paul was not looking for power or control. When his work with a church was finished, he was happy to move on. He inspired churches to reach out to others and sought to go to

places where the Gospel had not yet been preached. His desire was neither to boast about himself, nor to make claims concerning what others had done. Today, we would say he was not an 'empire builder'. Paul's only boast was about the Lord, not about himself.

God's Approval

The only approval that Paul sought, was the approval of God. He did not seek the approval of the Corinthians or anyone else. As he said to the Philippians, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (*Philippians 1:21*). This is the attitude that he had towards the Corinthians.

Points to Consider:

1. How much humility and gentleness are evident in our ministry to others?
2. Are we alert to discern when a battle is spiritual rather than just physical?
3. What does it mean to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ?
4. Are we guilty of using our own standards to commend ourselves?
5. Do we boast about our achievements or about what Jesus has done for us?
6. Are we possessive of our ministry or are we willing to move on to regions beyond?

2 Corinthians 11

Here, Paul expresses his concern that false apostles may have been leading the Corinthians astray and he urges them to remain faithful to the Gospel that he has preached.

Paul's Godly Jealousy

Paul was concerned that the Corinthians appeared willing to be led astray from their sincere and pure devotion to Christ, by people who were preaching a false gospel. He expresses his fear that the Corinthian church was allowing itself to be deceived and he urges them not to accept a different Jesus or to succumb to a different spirit from the Holy Spirit that they had received. There is only one Gospel and Paul expresses his total commitment to Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture and to the Holy Spirit poured out on the Day of Pentecost and to the Good News of the Gospel, which tells us how we can be saved from God's wrath and have our sins forgiven!

Paul's Love for the Corinthians

Paul's approach was to serve people, whether they paid him or not. With the Corinthians, he did not ask for any material benefits from them and he indicates that it was the support of other Christians and their churches that had enabled him to work for them without charge. He also declares his love for them and his determination to destroy the false teaching of those who were pretending to be apostles of Christ.

False Teachers

We do not know much about the preachers to whom Paul was referring. However, he was clearly very upset about the situation. His comments about Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Gospel, indicate people who were not sharing the truth but were, apparently, very eloquent and popular. An example of this today, would be people with attractive personalities, who use ministry to make money rather than being true servants of Christ.

Paul was determined to expose false teachers, deceitful workers and those who were pretending to be what they were not. He tells us that Satan sometimes appears as an angel of light - very attractive and compelling but, in fact, evil and destructive. Sadly, some who appear to be godly are, in fact, under his control.

Paul's Sufferings

Paul knew that many regarded him as foolish but he declares himself as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was not looking for a comfortable life or for a ministry that made him popular and rich. His background presented a strong record, qualifying him to speak with

authority. Paul had worked exceptionally hard at preaching the Gospel. He had been in prison, he had been flogged, he had been beaten with rods, he had been stoned and he had been shipwrecked three times. He undertook dangerous journeys, he went without sleep, he experienced hunger and thirst and he endured much personal hardship. Nevertheless, he was totally committed to sharing the truth in Christ, regardless of the personal cost to himself.

The Churches

Despite his long list of sufferings, Paul shares another matter which weighs heavily upon him. It is his burden for all of the churches that God has used him to plant. They are constantly on his mind and in his prayers. Paul boasts of his weaknesses because it honours God, who protects and strengthens him. He seeks eternal praise for the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, who had delivered him from Damascus and prepared Paul for his life of ministry.

Points to Consider:

1. Jealousy is usually a sinful emotion but what kind of jealousy is righteous?
2. Are we determined to expose false teaching that could lead God's people astray?
3. Are we aware that Satan's servants can masquerade as servants of righteousness?
4. What was different about Paul's ministry to that of those he describes as 'false apostles'?
5. Paul had a real burden for the churches that he had planted. How deep is our commitment to ministry?

2 Corinthians 12

Paul shares an insight into an extraordinary vision that God had given him but he also talks about being given a thorn in his flesh, which he considered was to humble him regarding the great revelations that he had received. Paul had a very special and powerful understanding of God's grace and he is very aware of the needs of the early church. He is particularly concerned for the Corinthians and expresses his longing that they should be strengthened in their faith.

Paul's Vision

Paul's vision was remarkable and it had made a great impression on him. He recalls that it had been 14 years since he received the vision and he speaks of it in terms of not fully understanding all that had happened to him. However, it seems to have been a vision about heaven. The word 'paradise' was used by Jesus on the cross, when he comforted the thief that he would be taken safely through death. The experience clearly brought much joy to Paul and, whilst we don't know quite what he saw, it must have been truly wonderful!

The Thorn in the Flesh

Many people have attempted to determine what this was but we just don't know. However, it was something that was real and obviously kept Paul humble, so that he would boast about God but never about himself. It would seem that his experience of the vision could have tempted him to be proud but, whatever the thorn in the flesh was, it reminded him of his weaknesses and his need to depend on God. Paul describes it as a messenger of Satan, indicating that the devil might have been allowed to inflict this suffering, just as Job was tempted by the evil one under the sovereignty of God.

The Power of Christ

In order to handle the glory of the experience but still to serve God effectively, Paul would need God's grace. The vision was great but the thorn in the flesh was also considerable. Paul was blessed but also felt weakness and he needed to draw upon God's mercy and strength, to know the power of Christ and be able to cope with many persecutions and struggles in the ministry.

Paul's Concern for the Corinthians

Paul was aware that some teachers were considered more eminent than him but he argues that the signs, wonders and miracles that he had patiently wrought amongst the Corinthians were sufficient proof of his apostolic ministry. He indicates that he did not want to be a burden to the believers and describes himself as being like a parent, whose responsibility

was to support rather than be supported. Paul had sent Titus and Titus had behaved in the same way to the Corinthians as Paul did. Paul indicates that he has not been seeking to defend himself but, rather, that he has a desire for the church to be built up and strengthened. Paul was hoping to see them for a third visit but he was concerned that he might find things that were displeasing to God and he lists various sins that might be present in the life of the church. Disorder and immorality have often undermined the message of the church in the past and they can still be evident in the church today. Paul was very concerned for the Corinthians and we can safely say that he would have been overjoyed if he could have found that the things he feared were happening, were not.

Points to Consider:

1. How did Paul understand and share the vision of heaven that God had given him?
2. Why did God allow a thorn in the flesh to trouble Paul?
3. How have we experienced the sufficient grace of God?
4. What does Paul fear he will find in the Corinthian church?
5. Do we have the same concern for the church that Paul had?

2 Corinthians 13

Paul is now bringing his second letter to a close. He has been handling some very difficult issues but he has sought to speak with integrity and clarity.

Witnesses

Paul wisely teaches that everything should be established by the testimony of 2 or 3 witnesses, to ensure that unrepentant sinners in the church are dealt with firmly but fairly. He is committed to building a strong church, which seeks to grow in unity and always aims for perfection!

Living by God's Power

Paul shares this important truth, that Christ was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Of course, there is a great contrast between the humility of Jesus in laying down his life and the authority of Jesus in his resurrection. Paul recognises this and teaches that, as we seek to practise godly humility, this will be perceived as potential weakness, because our submission to the Father's will appears to be so very passive. However, we have the awesome responsibility to speak with authority by God's power, when we need to confront anything that is sinful!

Self-Examination

Paul urges the Corinthians to look into their lives, to test whether they have true faith in Christ. He is putting this challenge to the Corinthians, in the hope that they will discover, firstly, that they are in a good place with God and, secondly, that Christ is speaking to them through Paul's words. However, if they fail this test and discover that they have not been genuinely saved, then they need to face up to that reality!

Aiming for Perfection

Paul realises that some of the issues about which he has challenged the people, have not been easy. However, he wants to share the truth, so that people can be thoroughly equipped to serve God faithfully. The object of his teaching and discipline is never intended to be destructive, because he wants to build them up and not tear them down. His desire is that, having received this letter, the Corinthians will root out sinful behaviour and deal with the issues themselves, so that Paul's visit will be gentle and not harsh.

Paul's desire is that there should be rejoicing and not sorrow. Where things have been broken down, he longs for relationships and situations to be restored. He desires them to encourage one another and live in peace, knowing that, then, God's love and peace will be known among them.

A Holy Kiss

We do not know what the customs were when the Corinthians met one another. We know that in our world, there are different greetings. Some may shake hands, some may hug, some will nod to one another and some will kiss. Paul teaches that the kiss should be a 'holy kiss'. This means a kiss of genuine affection and respect, with nothing impure behind it. Paul has been contending with the Corinthians about immorality within the church and this may still be in his mind as he urges appropriate caution in their manner of greeting.

Final Greetings

Paul shares greetings from God's people that he is working with, followed by words that have long been adopted by many churches as an appropriate way to end their times of worship. The Trinity is mentioned – the Lord Jesus Christ, Almighty God and the Holy Spirit, together with 3 important characteristics:

- 1. Grace** – The mercy that comes to us undeserving sinners, because Jesus has dealt with our sin on the cross.
- 2. Love** – God is love. It is the heartbeat of His personality. God loves the world and He sent Jesus.
- 3. Fellowship** – The great thing about the Holy Spirit, is that he is with us all, wherever we are. The Holy Spirit inspires us as God's people and comforts us when we are oppressed. Whatever we are handling – persecution, hunger, grief – we are never alone. The Holy Spirit is always there to draw us closer to God!

Points to Consider:

1. How diligent are we to establish things through witnesses, rather than listening to gossip and hearsay?
2. How do we handle the balance between our weakness and living by God's power?
3. Do we take time to assess our spiritual life and respond to areas we need to improve upon?
4. Does our ministry tend to build people up for works of service or tear them down?
5. Are we discerning about the way that we greet one another in the body of Christ?