

Reflect on This

2 Cor 13

We have seen therefore how Paul was challenged about his third visit. He genuinely wanted to see some progress but he feared that his expectations of them and theirs of him would differ, that he would find advice (commands) ignored and that there would be those who continued in sexual sin in particular despite being warned on a number of occasions.

At the end of the previous chapter Paul tells them of his own thoughts and fears for the forthcoming visit. But at the beginning of this chapter it's clear that he wants them to reflect on what this visit will mean for them

First of all he deals with the personal criticism and antipathy that has been shown for him. This letter has shown criticism coming from the Corinthian Christians aimed at him has been groundless. So how will he face any further criticism when he comes? He uses scripture.

Here's what he says: *Any accusation must be upheld by the evidence of two or more witnesses—as the scripture says. The statement comes from Deut 19:15 One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offence he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.* Jesus develops this idea in Matthew 18..

When someone has something against another believer this is the scriptural way of dealing with matters. The unscriptural way is what was happening at Corinth – in his absence there was a small minority of people gossiping about Paul, condemning him, repeating the groundless words of the “super apostles”. But how true were they?

The thing about gossip is that is all about half truths. It's part right but the part that's wrong makes the whole of it wrong. That's why in the legal cases in the Old Testament required witnesses. It's how the law works. Evidence must be weighed in order to determine the truth. If you look at the Leveson Inquiry, they are taking the testimony of a vast number of witnesses. Why? To get to the truth about something. Even when people aren't lying, sometimes different perspectives on an issue brings us to the truth.

The different witnesses allow us to find the truth. It's an important principle for leaders or for that matter for anyone. When something dramatic happens in the church or in someone's life, don't jump to conclusions, speak to the people involved and work out what's happened. It's often different than first impressions.

Jesus has another variation on this in Matthew 18:15 *"If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. 16 But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that "every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses," as the scripture says. 17 And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.*

The basic principle if you have something against your brother is you go to him and try to win him over. If that doesn't happen then Deut 19 comes into play. You take two or three witnesses – again with the attempt to win him over. If that fails then it's a church matter and that's serious.

What's interesting here in Corinth was that it was moving quickly from the early stages to resolving the issue in the church. He knew that much of what was being said about him was false and hearsay. He knew it, the church knew it. The witnesses were already there – the people who faithfully had stuck with Paul against the false teachers. Similarly, the warnings about immorality had been made before. It had become a church matter and Paul warns of the conclusion.

2 I want to tell those of you who have sinned in the past, and all the others; I said it before during my second visit to you, but I will say it again now that I am away: the next time I come nobody will escape punishment.3 You will have all the proof you want that Christ speaks through me. When he deals with you, he is not weak; instead, he shows his power among you.4 For even though it was in weakness that he was put to death on the cross, it is by God's power that he lives. In union with him we also are weak; but in our relations with you we shall share God's power in his life.

This was a warning. It wasn't just a “risk getting thrown out” issue. Paul talks of his authority and God's power and I couldn't help thinking of Ananias and Sapphira when I read this. For them the consequences of knowingly lying before God to Peter was that they were struck dead. Ouch! Paul was equally as tough

when it came to doing God's work – *1 Tim 1:18 Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, 19 holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. 20 Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.*

It's quite a stern passage. I did a video a while back about *Getting away with It* on the subject of why people knowingly do things wrong. For may it is the belief that no-one will bring them to account for their sin. So last year, people rioted and looted shops, believing that being part of a mob, no-one would bring them to account. They forgot about the CCTV – someone was watching.

People do it in the area of moral behaviour all the time. They think that God isn't bothered because He doesn't do anything about it. But He watches and He will call every man and woman to account. So why does He let things happen 2 Peter 3 verse 9: God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish but all to come to repentance.

Unfortunately, Christians can and do behave in much the same way. We even have the worse excuse of doing something believing that because of Jesus, God will let us get away with it anyway. A categoric no to that. The Corinthians had been the subject of God's patience. There had been plenty of warning, but their time was running out. God is not soft on sin. He's not soft on our sin either! Examine yourself. If he's warning you right now then stop, repent.

The Corinthians got much the same warning.

Put yourselves to the test and judge yourselves, to find out whether you are living in faith. Surely you know that Christ Jesus is in you?—unless you have completely failed. 7 We pray to God that you will do no wrong—not in order to show that we are a success, but so that you may do what is right, even though we may seem to be failures. For we cannot do a thing against the truth, but only for it.

There is sometimes a good reason why people who claim to be Christians seem to live in defiance of God in terms of the lifestyle that they lead: they're not Christians! To those people that had resisted all advice about their lifestyle or their criticism of Paul, the challenge came out *Put yourselves to the test and judge yourselves, to find out whether you are living in faith.* The NIV puts it like this: *5 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?*

It's an easy question. We dealt with it this morning. If someone is not acting like Jesus, then is Jesus in them at all? They were being asked to consider that. But it is a question that has a message for those that would easily say “yes” when asked if Jesus was in them which is the slant the NIV puts on it. If they are living a life that dishonours Jesus, then if they are His, then why are they doing it. They need to stop.

It's advice to us too: to act with circumspection because our actions should show who we are in Christ. If they don't then God calls on us to do something about it and repent. The Spirit empowers change as we saw this morning. More on that in a moment.

After all that the letter finishes on a positive note: Paul's desire for them

We are glad when we are weak but you are strong. And so we also pray that you will become perfect. 10 That is why I write this while I am away from you; it is so that when I arrive I will not have to deal harshly with you in using the authority that the Lord has given me—authority to build you up, not to tear you down.

All the warnings and the command to judge themselves was in a context. The context for Paul was that they be built up. It should always be our intention for people to lead them towards holiness; to build them up. It's back to this morning's theme. Paul recognises our human weakness but also the way God empowers us.. Let go back to v4 – I'll give it to you from the NIV:

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. 4 For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.

Paul talks about the power of God both in the context of God dealing with their sins, but even more so in terms of bringing them to the kind of people God wants us to be. We know from the first letter that they were quite familiar with the power and presence of God. It is a reminder that what strength we have we get from God.

Jesus was crucified. A sign of weakness? No! He was raised again by God's power. Paul was just an ordinary weak man – he was able to live to serve them.

We are weak, but we have a God who is powerful amongst us and that can even be more so as we seek to do His work.

Let's finish with Paul's ending

11 Finally, brothers, good-by. 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. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All the saints send their greetings. 14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

The summary for this rather stern letter is this and it sums up the last two chapters

- aim for perfection
- be of one mind, live in peace – not a token we'll put up with one another but that we'll truly be peaceful that's why Paul says greet one another with a holy kiss – that's a mark of close friendship.

Prayer

Examination

Confession

Repentance

Empowerment

Verse 11 - 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

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

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