

September 26, 2021

A FINAL LOOK AT THE APOSTLE'S LOVE FOR THE CHURCH

2 Corinthians 12:14-13:14

(22 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

Paul wrote in Philippians 2:1-11 that each of us as believers should model ourselves after Christ, who left glory to take on flesh, suffer, and die for us. Specifically he tells us to do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, to count others more significant than ourselves, and to look out for the interest of others instead of just our own. Now, that is a high calling. And it may be that the main thing that keeps us from feeling the weight of this calling is our familiarity with the text. Oftentimes, we can become so familiar with a biblical text that we gloss right over it when reading it. And with this text specifically, it may be that we're so familiar with the verses 5-11 that we move right past Paul's exhortations to the note of Christ's work in humbling himself, being obedient to death, and being exalted to God's right hand. That glorious truth rightly gets the headlines when we look at those verses in Philippians 2, and yet it does us well to consider what we're called to as believers in that text.

You and I are to live our lives making sure we're doing nothing out of selfish ambition. And in a world where people are trying to exalt themselves at every turn, that's going to feel like we're swimming upstream. But it gets harder. We're to count others as more significant than ourselves. Consequently, we make decisions asking not what is best for ourselves but what is best for others—and as believers—what is best for the church. And I think the temptation when we hear commands like that is to dismiss them as simply being out of reach. We might ask, "Who really does this? What would it look like if someone really tried?" And perhaps because we don't have immediate answers to those questions come to mind, we just move on, thinking of these commands as lofty and unattainable goals that we're never supposed to take seriously anyway.

Then we come to 2 Corinthians. I've mentioned throughout our study of this letter that Paul seems more autobiographical here than in his other letters. He lets us see his motives, his struggles, his joys, his disappointments, and his methods. The mere fact that he uses sarcasm so much throughout this letter lets us see in to his frustration with the Corinthians being tempted to listen to these false teachers and dismiss Paul. But this look into the inner life of the apostle throughout the letter also serves us in that we get to see how someone lives out the commands of Christ. We get to see his thoughts and heart behind what he does in his ministry. In this case, we get to see how Paul lives out those lofty commands that he gives us in Philippians 2. In other words, I think 2 Corinthians 12:14-13:14 provides for us a model of what our hearts should be like toward the church if we're going to have the mind of Christ in our dealings with one another.

Now, before we dive into looking at how Paul thinks, speaks, feels, and acts toward the Corinthians, it's fair to note that Paul is an apostle, speaking to the church, and so consequently someone might say that it's unreasonable to think we reflect the same heart and thoughts toward the church that he does. Therefore, after walking through the text and looking at Paul's

relationship, heart, and commitment to the church, I want to argue just why I think Paul is not some exception but should be the model for every believer's relationship toward the church. What then do we see in Paul in our text? First, we see Paul's eagerness to spend himself for the church.

Paul's eagerness to spend himself for the church

Paul opens our text by announcing that he's ready to come to them for a third time (v. 14). The first time, of course, was when he planted the church, and the second time was that "painful visit" he referred to earlier in this letter when he had to confront them about some sinful situation. Now he's coming again. And he notes that he's not going to change his approach in terms of not charging them for his ministry to them, even though they took that as a reason to think he's deceitful. He makes note of this in verse 16, saying, "But granting that I myself did not burden you [financially], I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit." He then follows that by showing that he never took advantage of them in whomever he sent or whatever they did (vv. 17-18).

But in addition to telling the Corinthians that he's going to continue to minister for free and defending himself against their charges, Paul does something else in these verses. He unveils what is in his heart for them that drives him to make sure they're not being financially burdened by his ministry. He writes in verses 14-15, "And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls." Then, in verse 19 he reminds them that his defense of himself throughout this letter hasn't really been aimed at defending himself before them. He looks to God as his judge, for one. But, additionally, he's just been trying to get them not to write him off because he loves them and wants to build them up. He knows that he is key to their walking with Christ.

The relationship that Paul holds up is that of a parent and a child. In other words, if you want to know Paul's heart toward the Corinthians, then consider a parent-child relationship. He doesn't want to charge them for his ministry because he reasons that a parent sacrifices financially for their children, not the other way around. Additionally, parents have a much greater aim than having children benefit them financially. I haven't run the numbers, but I feel pretty confident that having children typically doesn't leave you in the black when the books are balanced! But let's take Paul's image here. Imagine your child had been disobedient. Thereby he's causing you heartache, you're shedding tears over his struggles, and your prayers seem non-stop. Then, in the midst of all of that he comes to you and says, "I know that I'm causing you a lot of heartache, so here's a hundred bucks to offset that." What would you say? Wouldn't you say, "I don't think you get it. I don't want your money. I want you. I want your heart"? That's what Paul is saying, "I seek not what is yours but you" (v. 14).

Paul loved the Corinthians, and if he faced financial burden in order to serve them, he'd happily do it. He just wanted their good—as a parent wants the good of a child. As he notes in verse 15, he's happy to spend and be spent for them. Shouldn't this be the posture of a believer toward

the church? We're willing to sacrifice of ourselves, serve at cost to ourselves, and pour out our lives for the good of Christ's bride? Isn't that what is meant by counting others more significant than us? Isn't this what having the mind of Christ demands when our Lord loves his bride and gave himself up for her?

You'll find a very consistent theme in the Scripture, and it is the theme that loving Christ means loving his people. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, each time telling Peter that if he loved him, then he should feed his sheep. The risen Christ told the persecutor Saul (before changing his name to Paul) that his attack on the church was an attack on Christ himself. And in the day of judgment, Jesus will tell his people that inasmuch as they cared for the church, he considers that to be showing affection and caring for him.

And don't you resonate with that? I thank God for the prayers of God's people, but what has most moved me to tears is someone telling me that they've prayed for Lili or the kids when they knew they were struggling. Loving Jesus means loving his bride. And so we have a tangible outlet for reflecting our love for Jesus. We love his people, the church. Consequently, if it is reasonable to think that we would spend and be spent for the sake of Jesus himself, isn't it equally reasonable to think that we're willing to spend and be spent for his bride, the church? This was Paul's heart. He was eager to spend himself for the sake of the church. And as we've noted so many times, that disposition of one's heart doesn't seem like super-Christianity when we consider the teaching of Scripture. It's simply the reasonable expectation for a Christian.

So that's the first element we see here. Paul has such love for the church that he's willing to spend and be spent for them. My prayer is that the same might be true of us. But we would say too little to sum up Paul's heart simply with that observation. We also see Paul's yoking of himself to them.

Paul's yoking of himself to the church

In 12:20-21 Paul expresses his concern that he may well show up in Corinth only to find that some of them are still walking in sinful patterns of behavior. He writes in verse 20, "For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder." In other words, if he finds them walking in sin, though they've accused him of being bold in his letters and cowardly when present, they're going to find that he is by no means cowardly as he addresses their sin. But the emotion that will arise from his heart doesn't seem to be anger. He writes in verse 21, "I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of whose who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced."

Do you hear his heart? He will mourn in light of their sin. He will be humbled before them when he sees that they are not walking well. Now, why would Paul be humbled about *their* sin? I mean, it's not *his* sin. Typically when we hear that someone else sins we might not always find ourselves humbled, so why would this—combined with mourning—be Paul's reaction?

Well, we can think of occasions where we would feel just like Paul. Again, take Paul's earlier imagery of a parent toward a child. When your child sins, you don't think, "Well, I'm glad that's my child and not me," as if completely unaffected by their actions. You're humbled, aren't you? Even if their actions are out of our control or they're doing what we've worked hard to instruct them not to do, we're still humbled. Now, why? Isn't the answer that our hearts are yoked to them?

We could take a number of relationships in which this happens to illustrate this. Paul, the apostle, would be humbled if a church he founded is sinning, and he would mourn. A pastor is humbled and mourns when members whom he oversees rebel against the Lord. Parents are humbled and mourn when their children sin. And in each situation the common factor is that they're identified with them, tied to them, or (as I have said) yoked to them. Paul is identified with the Corinthians. The pastor is identified with the church. The parent is identified with the child. But it's stronger, isn't it? Each is yoked together in affection, love, and identity. Paul feels humbled and mourns at the thought of their sin because he has yoked himself together with his brothers and sisters in love.

This is the kind of relationship that the Bible expects believers to have toward the church. So, perhaps we should ask ourselves, "Is this descriptive of me? Have I so bound myself to a local congregation that their sin would cause me to be humbled and mourn?" If not, seek that. That was Paul's heart. And yet Paul's heart doesn't lead him to ignore their sin or pretend it doesn't exist, lest he feel it. Rather, in 3:1-4, we see Paul's willingness to exercise discipline in the church.

Paul's willingness to exercise discipline in the church

As Paul opens this last chapter, he mentions again that this will be the third time he's coming to see them, and then he throws in the OT qualification that there must be two or three witnesses for a charge to be established (3:1). Now, the reason he's saying this because he's establishing the context of talking about church discipline. When Jesus speaks of discipline in Matthew 18:15-20, he too—in that context—mentions that when two or three are present, he is with him in this exercise of removing one from the church, saying that the removed one doesn't demonstrate that he or she knows Christ. That's been called "excommunication," but we can simply think of it as the final stage of church discipline. And Paul himself has warned them multiple times. There have been sufficient witnesses, and so when he comes, for those who refuse to repent, they are going to be removed from the church as an act of discipline.

What's interesting about this is that some of the Corinthians have been listening to Paul's opponents who claim that Paul is bold in his letters but weak and cowardly when in person. Well, Paul is saying that they're going to see him not in weakness if they don't repent. He says in verses 2-4, "I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful

among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you, we will live with him by the power of God.” Paul is coming to remove any who refuse to repent after these repeated warnings. He is willing to exercise discipline.

However, we established earlier that Paul doesn’t get his kicks from this (see ch. 2). He’s not thinking, “Yes! I can’t believe we’re going to get to remove one from the church again.” He mentioned before that he hoped he wouldn’t have to do this. Then in 13:10, he mentions that he’s writing this letter because he wants to avoid disciplining anyone if possible. He writes, “For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.” He doesn’t want to discipline, but he’s willing to.

And isn’t that the posture of anyone who loves another? If we love disciplining others, something is wrong in our hearts. But if we’re unwilling to discipline, we cannot claim to love because love does what is necessary for the good of another, even if it’s hard. And so though Paul does it with humility and with tears in mourning, he’s willing to exercise discipline in the church, which also must be our stance as believers. And finally, we see Paul’s seeking of their good instead of his own.

Paul’s seeking of their good instead of his own

As Paul ends this letter, this is what stands out most. Paul is seeking the Corinthians’ good, even above his own. He begins verse 5 by asking them to examine themselves to see if they are in the faith. He says, “Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” Paul here puts them on the horns of a dilemma. They could look at their lives and say, “Yes, we’re Christians. Jesus is in us and is transforming us.” But if that’s the case, they would show that by repenting and acknowledging that they know Christ because of Paul’s ministry. However, if they say they fail the test and don’t look to be Christians, then the answer is to repent—do the very thing Paul is telling them to do—and turn to Christ. But there simply is no ground for saying their Christians while rejecting Paul and continuing to walk in sin.

That’s what Paul is acknowledging in the next verse by saying, “I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test” (v. 6). That is, when they realize they know Christ they will see that it is because of Paul’s ministry to them, and if Paul’s ministry is bringing knowledge of Christ to people, then he isn’t to be sidelined but listened to and obeyed. In other word, Paul will pass the test in their eyes as being a faithful minister of Christ.

But ultimately Paul wants them to know that his main concern isn’t that he looks spectacular to them, but that they walk in holiness. He says in verse 7, “But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.” Even if they judge that Paul should have done better perhaps in helping them walk in holiness, he is simply concerned that they walk in holiness now.

The truth is his only aim (v. 8). And even if he looks weak but they are strong, he'll rejoice. He cares more about their genuine good than his appearance before others.

Therefore, we see in this last section of the letter Paul's eagerness to spend and be spent for the Corinthians' good, his yoking of himself to this church so that he is humbled and mourns if they sin, his willingness to exercise discipline for their holiness, and his seeking of their good even above his own. And I want to say that this should be a model for us. In some sense, I think that's what verses 11-14 are about. Paul is saying, "Now, you live out what you see reflected in me."

But someone could say that this is a stretch. Someone could say, "Paul's unique relationship with the Corinthians led him to a robust love for that church and union with them and involvement with them that simply can't be paralleled in our lives toward the church and shouldn't be expected of ordinary Christians." And I have two responses. The first is that everything we see from Paul here he's actually commanded this specific church to do in his previous letter. Let's walk backwards with our points. What about looking out for the good of the church even at cost to oneself? Well, remember when Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 6 not to sue one another? He said to them, "To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" (1 Cor 6:7). In other words, why not put the good of the church above your own, even if it leads to you suffering wrong? Well, what about his willingness to do the hard work of exercising discipline? The answer of course is that this is precisely what Paul calls the Corinthians to do in 1 Corinthians 5, telling them to "Purge the evil person from among [themselves]" (1 Cor 5:13). What then about his yoking himself to them so that he is humbled by their sin and mourns when they rebel? Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians 12 is that we are all members of one body. Consequently, he says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor 12:26). And what about his willingness to spend and be spent for their good? Isn't this Paul's whole argument in 1 Corinthians 13? We love another, serve one another, and pour out ourselves for one another's good (i.e. the good of the church).

And my second response is that already Paul has told us to look at what Christ did and have that same mind among ourselves. And he came and lived, laid down his life in death, and was raised so that sinners like you and me could have life. Surely, if that's the picture Paul wants us to have in mind as we live our lives, it is good and right to say that we can follow the apostle's example of what it looks like to love the bride of Christ, which is the church. Now, let's remember his love for us as we come to the table. Amen.