
November 29 : Scriptures 1 Corinthians 13-16

SUMMARY

"All you need is love" (John Lennon). "It's love that makes the world go round" (W.S. Gilbert). In response to Mssr. Gilbert, "Love doesn't make the world go round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile" (Franklin P. Jones). Amen!

I had a bit of fun looking up quotes about love to open this *Cruisin' Through The Bible* day. Lo and behold! The very first quote I found at *123 Best Love Quotes That Prove True Romance Really Does Exist* (goodhousekeeping.com/life/relationships/g3721/quotes-about-love) comes from the Apostle Paul's pen, as noted in 1 Corinthians 13, where we begin our reading. But first, one introductory verse:

"But desire (*zeloo* – be zealous for) the greater gifts. And I will show you an even better way." (12:31).

After addressing numerous problems among the Corinthian believers, Paul shares the primary stone that holds the entire Corinthian congregation together – love! It's true according to God's inspired word. There is nothing greater than love, for God is the greatest of everything in all realms, and God is love (1 John 4:8). That makes Jesus love incarnate, the physical embodiment of love, love walking around in human flesh. When he was sad, he loved (John 11:35-36). When Jesus was teaching people who had difficulty understanding Him, he loved (Mark 10:21).

When you read John's Gospel and Letters, you realize John speaks much about God's love for us. Loving God and loving people are inseparable. If we claim to love God but don't love others, our love for God is a lie (1 John 4:20). Here's another stinger, "This is how God's children and the devil's children become obvious. Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, *especially the one who does not love his brother or sister*" (1 John 3:10, italics author). It proves we're not of God if we don't love others. Why? Because God's love is poured into us through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), and as Jesus reached out in love to others, the Holy Spirit moves us to do the same.

The Greek mindset makes love a noun. The Hebrew mindset makes love a verb – to loving. Therefore, it's not enough to *feel* love toward our fellow Christians or unsaved people. Our highest effort is to *be loving*. And to be loving means more than just thoughts or words. As John reminds us, "Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Yes, we're called to walk the love talk. That's love

incarnate, the physical embodiment of love in us, that which makes us love walking around in the flesh, just like Jesus.

What does Paul have to say about love? Let me simplify it, if I may. You can have splendiferous and powerful spiritual gifts and live an utterly sacrificial life, even surrendering your life to God, but without love, it means absolutely nothing (13:1-3). *Selah.*

All the infighting, divisions, sin, poor behavior, and issues within the Corinthian congregation could be solved if they were loving toward one another. Otherwise, their walk with God, ministry to one another, and witness to Corinth are worthless and mean nothing.

But what does it mean to be loving? To be loving is to act kindly and not be envious, boastful, or arrogant toward others. (Paul strikes at the heart of the Corinthian problem.) I could go on, but these verses have been used so many times during weddings we miss how powerful they are. I want to reinterpret them positively to help you appreciate what Paul is teaching.

Being loving is acting kindly, being happy for what others are or have, and being humble and modest. Being loving means being polite, working toward the goodwill of others, being good-natured and agreeable, and forgiving (refusing to punish another for a past wrong). When we're loving, we rejoice in righteousness and truth at all times (13:4-6).

Along with the Be-Attitudes (Beatitudes, Matthew 5), we could add this list as the Being Loving Attitudes!

How supreme is love? According to Paul's Greek words, to be loving toward another means we bear up under pressure, trust abundantly, wait with pleasant anticipation, and remain constant while suffering patiently (13:7). Now take a moment and think about how Jesus was this way with us. *Selah.*

Paul places the Corinthian believers' battle over spiritual gifts into perspective (13:8-10). We live two lives – present and future – and spiritual gifts are needed only in this life because they are a powerful way God interacts with us in our imperfect, limited physical world. But we won't need such gifts once the perfect comes – the restoration of all things where humanity is restored to our Edenic state. Every resurrected and glorified person will have direct access to God. On the other hand, love will never cease. We need it now

to live as God's people and will continue to do so in the Kingdom of the God Who Is Love. So, Corinthians, what is more critical – gifts or love?

Paul likens our present lives to being children and seeing with limited vision through a dark glass. The gifts are to assist us as children and semi-blind people. However, when we reach spiritual maturity with unhindered vision (13:11-12), we will no longer need the Holy Spirit's gifts to help us. And while the big three – trust in God, hope in God, and God's love – are of utmost value, only love sits at the eternal apex (13:13). (Take a breath and let that settle in.)

Having established love as the foundation and benchmark of the Corinthian believers' lives, Paul gets down to business. Because he concentrates his spiritual gifts training on the gifts of prophecy and speaking in unlearned languages, this must have been the primary source of contention in the congregation. I greatly appreciate that Paul doesn't forbid using spiritual gifts just because there have been some abuses. He simply offers correction and proper teaching.

Paul begins by telling them to do two things – pursue love and be *zealous* for the spiritual gifts (14:1). Love must come first for the reasons he just stated in chapter 13. But with love anchoring the gifts, the Corinthians should not be afraid to use them. Instead, they should be zealous about letting God work in their midst. Why? Because with tongues (as I'll call it), people talk to God, and with prophecy, God talks to His people (14:2-4).

Another critical guideline that Paul sets is that it must all be for congregational “strengthening (building a structure), encouragement (coming alongside to help), and consolation (coming alongside to comfort).”

The difference between the two is tongues builds up the individual while prophecy builds up the congregation. Is one more important than the other? Paul says that prophecy is because it affects everyone. However, if a tongue is interpreted, then it acts like a prophecy, and it, too, builds up the congregation (14:5).

Notice Paul's emphasis – building up the congregation is more important than building up the individual (although both are necessary). But Greek thinking is very “me” focused, and Hebraic thinking is very “we” focused. That's what Paul is trying to instill in his beloved Corinthians. Sure, tongues is a cool gift, but if nobody knows what you're saying, what benefit is the gift to the body (14:6-12)? The point is to be zealous for the gifts, especially those that build up everyone.

So, how should the person with the gift of tongues use it? It should be quieter if it's meant to be spiritual communication between the believer and the Lord. If the Lord releases the gift for the congregation's sake, the speaker should pray for an interpretation through them or another person (14:13-17). It would be the loving thing to do to let everyone in on what God is saying through you. Paul uses the gift of tongues frequently, but as he usually does, he sets himself as the model for the Corinthians – he would rather *restrict* his gift for the sake of the body than use it without benefit.

Paul clarifies the difference in purpose between tongues and prophecy (14:22-25). Tongues are a sign for believers, while prophecy serves as a sign to unbelievers. How so? Paul is glad you asked. If someone were to visit your church and everyone was babbling (and yes, sometimes speaking in tongues sounds like babbling weird syllables), they'd think you're nuts! But how would that same person react if they came to your congregation and you began to "read their book," telling them what's on their minds and revealing the deep concerns and pain of their hearts? They would fall on their faces and say God is with you because only God can discern the depths of the human heart (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

Paul gives the Corinthians more guidelines for spiritual gifts. 1) Use whatever gift you have to build up the body. That's most important. 2) Keep order. Don't talk over one another. Make sure there's an interpretation if a tongue is spoken out loud. If it's not for the congregation but for the individual, keep it on the down low. 3) Let the prophets speak in order and evaluate every prophecy for authenticity. If they follow this procedure, there will be peace and order.

Speaking of peace and order, we come to another one of those "Paul's guidelines" that many in the church have made into a universal rule, much to Christian women's harm and frustration. The context is *order when the congregation meets to worship and pray and an issue specific to the Corinthians*. To say Paul's guideline prohibits women from sharing in church gatherings is wrong because Paul tells everyone they can share (11:5) but in turn. In this light, it seems there were a group of women in the Corinthian congregation who were disruptive during corporate worship, which makes sense in Paul's context of peace and order. Apparently, this is linked to the above, "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should evaluate" (14:29). The specific women were being disruptive when they spoke with their husbands about a prophecy and trying to learn. It would be more appropriate for the wives to discuss and learn at home rather than carry on a discussion during worship.

Paul ends his talk on spiritual gifts by referring to his apostolic authority to set the community guidelines. As they worked through those guidelines, they needed to remember how the word came to them initially and through whom.

The apostle now tackles a *colossal* question within the Corinthian Christian community – Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' death is not the totality of the Gospel. His resurrection is essential to the whole Gospel because Jesus' return from the dead proves the Father accepted His self-sacrifice as atonement for our sins. No resurrection means no atonement. Jesus rising from the dead is His Father's stamp of approval and promise of our future resurrection into a glorified state to live with Him forever. If we aren't saved (forgiven and cleansed) and completed, then we can't live in God's presence. But if we are, we face the biggest adventure we can ever imagine!

So, Paul writes to the Corinthians about the truth and the hope of their resurrection. One thing I keep in mind is in Greek philosophy, the spiritual world is good, and the material/physical world is evil. Therefore, our spirit is good, and our body is evil. This dichotomy led to some Greeks rejecting and ridiculing Paul when he testified to them of Jesus' resurrection in Acts 17:32. However, some of the Greeks who had been listening became more interested because it flew in the face of their worldview.

Jesus' resurrection is a central dividing point even today. People can accept Jesus as a great teacher, and many accept that He was crucified, died, and was buried. But it's the truth of the resurrection that causes many people to reject Christianity's claims. Truth be told, the revelation of a coming resurrection of all dead people – good and wicked – is firmly embedded in Judaism as well. The Older and Newer Covenant resurrection scriptures + Jesus' resurrection = Christianson core belief in a future resurrection. Check this out, "Many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, and some to disgrace and eternal contempt." (Daniel 12:2). So, let's peruse what Paul share with the Corinthian believers as he draws to a close his letter to them. Because this is a lengthy treatise on the resurrection, I won't get into the theological weeds. We'll just hit some significant or difficult-to-understand points.

What's most important for the Corinthian believers to understand? "That Christ *died* for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was *buried*, that he was *raised* on the third day *according to the Scriptures*" (15:3-4, italics author). There you have the Gospel. The whole process that set the stage for our restoration to our Heavenly Father's family was foretold by God and recorded in the scriptures. Numerous eyewitnesses confirmed Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. According to the Torah, it takes 2-3 witnesses to establish testimony in a law court (Deuteronomy 19:15). Paul lists 514 or more people, and lastly,

himself, who saw Jesus alive and glorified in His resurrection body (15:5-8). That's more than sufficient evidence.

Speaking of being the last to see Jesus, it was that revelation of the resurrected Jesus that turned Paul's life around (15:9-11), and because he persecuted the church, Paul worked all the more with God's grace to share the Good News.

We come to the issue. Some of the Corinthian believers didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead (15:12). In a sense, they were half-believers, and for Paul, to deny the resurrection is to deny the faith entirely (15:17). 15:12-19 is Paul connecting the theological dots. No resurrection of believers = no resurrection of Jesus = no Gospel, and you're all sunk in sin and will die without hope. Plus, those who have died as Christians are lost, and living for Jesus only for this life is useless. Why? *Because the point of Jesus' work is for us to live with Him and the Father and the Spirit forever!*

*But Jesus has been raised from the dead (Hooray! *insert a little victory dance here*)!* Paul uses an essential but often glossed-over term here – first fruits. What does the term first fruits mean regarding Jesus' resurrection from the dead? If you've been *Cruisin' Through The Bible* in the Torah section (Genesis-Deuteronomy), you will have already learned about the first fruits. First fruits are the first products of any plant or animal, which are presented to God as an offering to thank Him for His provision and an advanced thanks for the complete harvest that will come at the end of the growing season.

In Israel, barley and wheat are planted in Autumn, and the winter rains water the crops. In springtime, during Unleavened Bread Week and after Passover, the first fruits of the barley are cut and presented to God on the Feast of First Fruits (late March-early April). A few months later, the wheat crop comes to maturity and is harvested in late May to early June. The Feast of Pentecost is known as the Feast of Weeks when the first fruits of the wheat harvest are offered to the Lord. So seven weeks elapse, from the Feast of First Fruits (barley) to Shavuot (the wheat first fruits).

Did you catch the link? The first fruits of barley (April) are connected to the first fruits of wheat (May). But, as they say on TV, "Wait! There's more!" The harvest of the year's products isn't complete. That happens throughout the summer, and the fullness of the harvest comes in during the Fall Feasts, of which the Feast of Tabernacles is a type of Thanksgiving celebration for the fullness of God's provision. (Check out the insight at the end for something special to think about.)

Paul says that Jesus' resurrection is the first fruit of God's work within humanity. Just as Jesus was resurrected, there will be a final harvest of resurrected righteous people when God's kingdom's "growing season" is complete. This is why Jesus put some of His End Time parables in agricultural terms (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; Mark 4:26-29, etc.).

Jesus has, in fact, been raised from the dead, and just as there's a complete harvest after the initial harvest (the first fruit), so there will be a resurrection of all believers at harvest time when God's kingdom manifests on earth at Jesus' return. But there's an order to this:

1) Jesus' resurrection first – done.

2) Next, the believers who are resurrected and join with Jesus at His return.

3) When Jesus has completed His 1,000-year Messianic Reign, after He has abolished all human and spiritual authority and powers, Jesus will hand the kingdom to His Father to operate as it was in the beginning with God the Father as the One and Only Supreme Universal King (15:20-28).

Why does Paul push the resurrection teaching? Because of the Christian experience. If there was no hope of a resurrection of the dead, then why would anyone endanger their lives for such a useless message (15:29-34)? We might as well live it up in this life if there's no hope (or dread) of resurrection and a final judgment.

So what will our resurrection bodies be like? Glad you asked. The Corinthians were asking the same thing. Paul says rather bluntly that resurrection only occurs after death, meaning our mortal bodies will pass away as we disintegrate into elemental particles. (Sounds great, doesn't it? At last, I'll be able to shed those extra pounds!) Just as a new plant (alive and vibrant) comes from a buried seed, our resurrected bodies will be vastly different from the original but from the same material as before, re-conditioned and re-formed (15:36-37).

The resurrection body will be a new body made from the elements of our old body – Body 2.0!

Our resurrected bodies may emerge with the elements of our original bodies, but God will be the one remaking, restoring, and rejuvenating them. What will they be like? Why, resurrected bodies, duh! Seriously, Paul doesn't describe them other than they will be vastly different by nature (15:34-46).

Current earthly bodies: Subject to corruption (death and decay). Used dishonorably in vileness and degradation. Subject to suffering, ill health, frailty, and intellectual and moral imperfection. A natural, animal-like body bound to the material world.

Future resurrected bodies: Immune to death and decay. Used for God's glory in goodness and honor. Enjoyed and employed with miraculous power, might, and strength. A spiritual body without physical limitations, "superior in process to the natural course of things" (from the Mounce and NAS Greek Dictionaries)

Yup. Sounds pretty cool! The best example of our future resurrected bodies is Jesus' post-resurrected body (15:47-49). Why do we need such a body? Paul says it's because our present body can't live in the world and existence He's designed for us (15:50).

Okay, Paul has talked about the resurrection body, the body given to those who have already died. What about those who are alive when Jesus returns? Will they stand there and watch their fellow believers materialize with new bodies while stuck with the old, busted, used car bodies? Nope. Paul drops a bombshell of a revelation that he'll repeat later.

Not everyone will die to get their glorified body, nor do they have to. There's a time coming when a trumpet will sound (we'll get to that later), and everyone alive will be changed as the dead are resurrected. At that moment, all the righteous believers will be fitted with new bodies for eternity, forever immune to death. Think about this – we're already living our eternal life with God, and we'll never experience separation from Him even though our earthly body dies. However, God wants to retrofit us with an everlasting body that matches our everlasting personhood and can live with Him forever (15:51-56). And Jesus makes it all possible (15:57)! Therefore, since we're looking at a future resurrection made sure by the truth of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, let's live like it (15:58).

To close out his letter, Paul reminds the Corinthians about their offering for the believers in Jerusalem. This letter was written about 14 years before the First Jewish Rebellion and the city's destruction by the Romans (A.D. 70); Jerusalem is still the epicenter for the Jews, messianic and non-messianic. It makes sense that the daughter congregations support the mother congregation (16:1-4). Paul will make sure the gift has trustworthy escorts.

Paul then shares his travel plans and a team update, mainly regarding Timothy and Apollos. He encourages them to "be alert, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be

strong” and closes his exhortation with a reminder of his benchmark point of the letter, “Do everything in love” (16:13-14).

As usual, Paul recognizes and commends those the Corinthians would know – the household of Stephanas (first fruits = among the first believers in the area), Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (apparently from Corinth). In return, Paul greets the Corinthians on behalf of the Asia Minor congregations, specifically the well-known Aquila and Priscilla. The “greet one another with a holy kiss” signifies fellowship among the believers. Paul writes a sentence in his handwriting to authenticate the letter (16:21).

Paul once again reminds his beloved Corinthians about love. If people don't love Jesus, they're under His curse, meaning they are still lost. Loving Jesus is a sign of our salvation, as loving one another is, per the Apostle John. He blesses them with Jesus' grace and assures them of his love. See? Love, love, love. Just like we started.

INSIGHT

“Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (15:20). As I've written before, Jesus was sinless and fulfilled the Feast of Unleavened Bread. He died on Passover because He was God's Passover Lamb of God who causes death to veer away from us. Jesus rose from the dead on the Feast of First Fruits, the very day! Paul is correct that Jesus is the First Fruits of those who have fallen asleep (died).

On the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot), our Heavenly Father took the first “harvest” of believers via the Holy Spirit's arrival. The Spirit made real in peoples' hearts the salvation Jesus secured at the cross when 3,000 Jewish pilgrims cried out, “Brothers, what should we do?” (Acts 2:37). So, what can we conclude about the resurrection of the dead and salvation in terms of first fruits?

The first fruits promise a harvest yet to come that God Himself will bring to completion. The first believers in Jerusalem on the Feast of Shavuot promise that there will be a massive ingathering of saved people by the time we reach the end of God's plan of salvation for humanity. And although only one person has been resurrected from the dead and given body 2.0, all believers – dead or alive – will receive the same body 2.0 so we can live with the Lord forever. When will this happen? If the Lord sticks to the pattern of the Spring Feasts, then we can expect Jesus' return, the resurrection of the dead, and the start of Jesus' 1,000-year reign at harvest time – during the Fall Feasts. I won't be dogmatic about that. I'll take it any time it comes. But every Autumn, I keep my eyes open and spiritual antennas up to see if events fall into place.

November 30 : Scriptures 2 Corinthians 1-4

SUMMARY

2 Corinthians is Paul's profoundly personal letter to his struggling Corinthian congregation. It was written around A.D. 56 after he had to address some rather severe issues among the believers. Paul had to confront infighting and divisions, rudeness in worship, misuse, and abuse of spiritual gifts, interpersonal relationships between men and women, questions about marriage vs. singleness and the resurrection, and how love should undergird everything the Corinthian believers do.

Paul had to verbally spank the Corinthians for tolerating terrible sin in their midst and demanded they excommunicate an unrepentant believer until he mends his ways. According to my Bible, Paul's first visit was his church planting visit. His second visit, unmentioned in Acts 19, was a "sorrowful or 'painful'" visit while he was ministering at Ephesus. Apparently, some false apostles had also visited the Corinthian congregation and stirred up trouble, causing many Corinthian believers to reject Paul and his apostolic authority. In response, Paul wrote a "severe letter of stinging rebuke to Corinth from Ephesus (2 Corinthians 2:3-4, 9)," what Titus carried to Corinth. Titus returned and told Paul most of the congregation members had repented and affirmed Paul's authority. However, there were a few hold-outs. 2 Corinthians is Paul's letter in which he tells of his relief and forgiveness while reaching out to the remaining resisters who refused his apostolic credentials. Paul promises to revisit the congregation in the future, which he did on his return trip to Jerusalem with a financial offering for the Jerusalem believers (Acts 20:2-3).

2 Corinthians is a three-part letter reinforcing Paul's apostolic calling and authority, sacrificial giving, and a head-on rebuke for the false apostles who were undermining his ministry. Paul also teaches about the New Covenant and life after death. Yes, it's kind of a scattered letter, but as you read, absorb the parts, especially as the Holy Spirit causes them to jump out to you. Listen for Paul's heart. Learn more about how true Christian leaders wrestle for and with their congregation. I guarantee you will appreciate your pastors, elders, deacons, missionaries, and others serving in full-time ministry! Let's begin.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will" (1:1). Paul kicks off his letter with an opening shot against the false apostles to establish his credentials. Let's review what apostles are. In 1st c. Judaism (and still today), an apostle (Greek *Apostolos*) is "one sent as a messenger or agent, the bearer of a commission." Think of an emissary, a representative who a synagogue or organization designates to act on their behalf to help start a new

congregation, strengthen an existing one, or act in some manner on behalf of the sending group. The Shaliach (Hebrew *shelach* "to send") operates with the authority and "power" on behalf of the sending person or agency.

On a spiritual level, Paul has been called and sent by Jesus Himself as His emissary, Shaliach, Apostle to the Gentiles. To receive Paul is to receive the One who sent him, Jesus, and to reject Paul is to reject Jesus. On a natural level, Paul was recognized as Jesus' called Apostle to the Gentiles by the core leaders of Jesus' movement – James and the Jerusalem Synagogue – and sent him out to gather Jews and Gentiles who believed in Jesus and organize them into Assemblies/Synagogues/Congregations.

Because Apostle Paul was Jesus' official representative and the one who planted the Corinthian congregation, it was no small matter for the assembly to reject his leadership and allow false apostles (whom we'll learn about later) to subvert his work. Therefore, Paul starts by laying out his credentials. He has the right to correct his congregation, but he'll do it with Jesus' heart for his spiritual children. As a recipient of God's stunning unmerited favor (i.e., grace), Paul starts and ends every letter with a blessing of grace on his readers (1:2).

Because of the tumult the Corinthian church has gone through, Paul starts his letter with words about mercy and comfort. I see Paul doing this because all the stress afflicted him and the Corinthian congregation, and now they both experience comfort in the aftermath. God, the Father, is the source of all comfort (Greek *paraklesis*, encouragement). When we're afflicted, He comforts us, and we, in turn, can comfort others who are going through the same afflictions (1:4). I love having someone who's gone through the trouble I'm experiencing to comfort and encourage me because they can relate to my situation.

Those who follow Jesus will suffer as He suffered if they serve people as He served them to bring life. Self-sacrifice for others' benefit isn't fun because it demands we die to what we want for their sake. But the flip side is we'll experience the same comfort and encouragement Jesus did when we see the fruit of our sacrifice (1:5-6). Paul knows that though the Corinthians have gone through a messy and painful situation, they'll experience Jesus' comfort as Paul has (1:7). His recent run-in with suffering (possibly referring to an unknown event at Ephesus) was staggering, even to the point of despair. But the apostle sees that its purpose was to help them build their trust in God as their deliverer. Paul testifies how the Lord helped him and his team through their trouble through the Corinthian prayers and will do so again.

The trouble comes via accusations. According to 10:2 and 10:10, Paul's critics accuse him of "living for his own selfish interest. They used his failure to return to Corinth (as he had planned) as evidence of his lack of sincerity... Paul's critics had accused him of being insincere in his letters, writing one thing and doing the opposite (10:10)" (NKJV Study Bible). Oh boy! How many church leaders have faced those accusations? Too many.

Did Paul plan to visit Corinth? Yes (1:15-16). Was he being duplicitous? No (1:17). But he changed his mind because of the situation (1:23, 2:1-2), and that doesn't negate the truth of what he had preached to them (1:18-20). God confirmed that by His anointing of power on them (1:21) as proof of the Holy Spirit's presence with them (1:22).

Paul didn't want to equate his presence with pain, so he wrote to them instead. Sometimes distance is needed when addressing a problem – passions often cloud reason. So Paul wrote a reasoned letter from a distance as he shed tears for his beloved congregation (2:4) in their plain. What caused their pain? It wasn't Paul but the man who had sinned and refused to repent (2:5). It's tough on a congregation to exercise church discipline, especially when the person in question is a significant part of the membership, even more so if the person is a leader. As a former pastor and a current reader of Christian media, I know that exposed sin with subsequent church discipline can tear apart a church body because of the raw emotions, feelings of betrayal, and disbelief involved. But as I pointed out earlier in my commentary on Matthew 18, church discipline is meant to turn the sinner around, lead them back to God and restore them into full and loving fellowship once again.

This seems to be the case after the Corinthians followed Paul's ex-communication advice, and now that it has had the right effect, it's time to "reaffirm your love to him" and restore the repentant man with Paul expressing his forgiveness, too (2:8-10).

But before the news came to Paul about the outcome of his recommended church discipline, he was agitated as he waited in Troas (on the Aegean coast where he received his call to Macedonia, Acts 16:8). Upon thinking of the excellent news from Titus about Corinth, Paul bursts into praise over the victorious resolution of the terrible situation. He uses the image of a Roman military procession where a general leads his soldiers and captives in a grand parade to proclaim his victory. Incense was offered in thanks, and the perfume would fill the air to reinforce the sensory experience of the general's success. As a significant Roman city, the Corinthians would easily understand Paul's metaphor with Jesus as the victorious general and His followers as His soldiers and treasure. The fragrance is knowledge of Jesus, and it stinks to those who are not saved because it represents impending judgment and death. But for those who understand God's grace

and salvation, knowing Jesus is like incense, a fragrance that surrounds our lives as we live for Him (2:14-16).

Who makes a person adequate/sufficient to minister this fragrance? Not Paul, as he'll point out shortly. It's the Lord alone who makes his servants adequate/sufficient for the job. On the other hand, there are those who "market the word of God for profit," i.e., a reference to the false apostles Paul will go after later (2:17). Unlike them, Paul ministers with sincerity before God.

Unlike his detractors, Paul isn't puffing himself up. The proof of Paul's calling from God to minister is in the lives of the Corinthians. I find it fascinating that Paul blends his need to write a letter with the Corinthian believers and the New Covenant in chapter 3. He needs no letter written from them to affirm his ministry as genuinely from God. They are his living letters of recommendation (3:2), evidence of his authenticity.

The proof of an effective and genuine disciple is when their character and spiritual life are duplicated in their disciples. Children take on the characteristics of their parent(s). As Jesus said, "It is enough for a disciple to become like his teacher and a slave like his master" (Matthew 10:25). Observers can see if Paul indeed preached and modeled Jesus by how well Jesus was displayed through the Corinthian believers' lives as written by the Holy Spirit via the New Covenant (3:3). Regarding the New Covenant and how the Holy Spirit writes on hearts, see Jeremiah 31:33.

Paul's confidence to be an effective minister is not in himself but in God (3:5). Isn't Paul's example a stark contrast to many leaders in U.S. churches today? Do we substitute smoke machines for the Holy Spirit's presence? Do we substitute catchphrases, provocative sermon titles, and illustrations for the plain Gospel? I'm not against using the conventions of the day to reach people, but how far is too far? Like Paul, it should start with the leader's heart. Like John the Baptist, let us decrease that Christ will increase.

Even though Paul was extremely well-educated in the Torah/Law, he declares that's not what made him a competent minister (Greek *diakonos*, minister, servant). It's the Holy Spirit who gives his ministry life (3:6).

Concerning the New Covenant, Paul compares the Older Covenant that came through Moses to the New Covenant that came through Jesus (3:7-18). Why does he call it the ministry of death? Because black-and-white laws set a standard that no one could reach because no one could always obey every command. Despite that, the Older Covenant, with its rules, came with great glory as God appeared and gave them to Moses (Exodus

19:18). God's glory was so intense it caused Moses' face to shine (3:7; Exodus 34:29-33). If the Older Covenant, which carried the death penalty for those who couldn't keep it, came with God's glory, how much more glory comes with the New Covenant that brings forgiveness, life, and the ability to live up to God's standard (3:8-10)?

Like Moses, who had to veil his face to hide God's glory because it freaked out the people, God's truth is veiled to those under the Older Covenant. That veil can only be removed by the Holy Spirit when He helps them understand the truth about salvation via Jesus under the New Covenant (3:12-16). The Holy Spirit, the activator of the New Covenant, brings freedom (3:17), and the glory of God shines forth from us in increasing measure as we reveal Him to the world through our words and deeds.

Paul continues his faithful ministry because of the mercy he experienced. He persecuted the believers, the Body of Christ, remember? True ministry comes from understanding how much mercy we've received from God. That's what kept Paul going (4:1). He takes another jab at the false apostles, who apparently used sham methods and twisted God's word to win over the Corinthians and turn them against Paul (4:2). But Paul was clear and direct with his handling of God's word. That's another mark of a genuine ministry. There was no "veiling" of the truth. The only veiling of the Gospel is regarding those who are perishing/unsaved (4:3). Satan has a hand in keeping God's truth about "the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" from the unsaved. Still, he can't prevent the truth from penetrating the blindfold when God decides to rip it off. Again, true ministry is not about displaying oneself but "Jesus Christ as Lord" (4:5). Do you see how Paul keeps moving the attention from himself to Jesus over and over?

What is this "treasure in jars of clay?" It's the revelation, presence, and glory of Jesus working in and through us via the Holy Spirit. God did it this way to glorify Himself, and there's nothing we can do to claim any credit for ourselves. By putting it this way, Paul accentuates God's strength and power versus our weakness and inability and then gives four examples:

<u>Our Frailty</u>	<u>God's power</u>
Afflicted	Not crushed
Perplexed	Not despairing
Persecuted	Not abandoned
Struck down	Not destroyed

Living for Jesus is a life of "death," *dying* to our desires and will, a life of self-denial. Jesus said it plainly, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross

daily, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). When your desires urge you to do something against God's commands willfully, you say to it, "You're dead to me," and then turn away from it. When we *die* to ourselves, we're *living* for Jesus. A life of self-denial so we can live for God is what Paul talks about in 4:11-13. The result is that as God raised Jesus from the dead, He will do the same to all of us who follow Him – Paul along with his faithful congregations (4:14). "All the suffering that Paul endured (verses 8-11) brought good to others and glory to God" (NKJV Study Bible) (4:15).

For this reason, Paul is willing to suffer afflictions because he knows that even though the clay jar is deteriorating, there's a greater glory – God's life – emerging and shining forth. All the trouble that he (and other faithful saved people) have experienced is nothing compared to what's coming in our future eternal lives. So, let's not focus on the seen things that are temporary (our afflictions) but on the unseen and eternal things (our life with Jesus). Doing so will help us press on despite what comes at us. Keep your eye fixed on the goal!

INSIGHT

I'm no "spring chicken." As I write this, I'm into my sixth decade of life. Does that bother me? Nope. Even though I watch my body age (*ahem*) ever so slightly (okay, a lot in some ways), I'm amazed at how the Lord works through me to minister to others. Am I puffing myself up? Not a chance because I know it's not me who shapes my character, changes my behavior, releases the spiritual gifts as I interact with people, pops fascinating thoughts into my head when I write or leads me to pray in ways that bring answers. It's Jesus and only Jesus.

Although the clay vessel of your body is deteriorating, Jesus remains as that glorious revelation and reality of God within you. As you cooperate with the Holy Spirit, Jesus' life will move through you, shaping you into His image, and you'll be "transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit."