

Passing the Test II Corinthians 13

“If I come again, I will not spare anyone.” Is that kind of tough talk really appropriate for a Christian, let alone a pastor? And how can Paul say this with a straight face? After all, he has spent a sizeable chunk of the preceding letter bragging, not about his apostolic power and authority, but about how many times he was beaten and thrown in jail, about how hungry and thirsty he had been for the sake of the gospel. In chapter 12 and verse 9, he sums it all up, saying that he will boast about his weakness, and he echoes that comment in verse 9 of this chapter. So how does it make sense for him to turn around and try to be some tough guy as his letter comes to a close?

Well, if in 12:9 Paul glories in his infirmities, his weaknesses, in the same verse he also says that the power of Christ dwells in him, and that’s the point to which he turns in this chapter. Now, this doesn’t negate what Paul has already said about accepting our weakness. It’s true that all Christians are called to follow Christ to the cross, laying down our priorities, our agendas, and sometimes our very lives so that others might come to acknowledge Him as their Savior and Lord.

Paul certainly did that for the Corinthians. He not only spent a lengthy period of time in Corinth when he helped organize their congregation. He not only continued to write letters to them, encouraging them to continue in the faith he had preached to them. No, as verse 7 implies, he kept on trying to minister to them even though many of them didn’t approve of his humble leadership style or his refusal to accept their financial gifts. Time and time again, Paul demonstrated his willingness to give up wealth and even self-respect in order to try to help the Corinthians. He truly took up his cross for them.

But in verse 4, Paul reminds us that although Jesus died on the cross for a world full of sinners, He didn’t stay in the grave. No, Jesus rose from the dead in power and majesty, and all authority in Heaven and in earth has been entrusted to Him. And so today, Jesus not only rules and reigns over all the earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is also the Head of the church, and He has in turn entrusted some of His authority to the leaders of His people – not only to apostles like Paul, but to the elders, the overseers who have succeeded them.

So, if we should share in the weakness of Christ, how should the leaders of the Church also express the authority of Christ? Verse 8 says that our main job is to speak the truth, and goes so far as to say that we can do nothing against the truth. That means that it is only as the leaders of the Church agree with and pass on the teachings of Christ and His apostles that we can claim any of their authority. But to the extent that what we say is in accordance with the Word of God, we can speak with the authority of Christ Himself.

And the sad truth is that all of us need to hear the truth of God’s Word again and again. That’s because it is all too easy to kid ourselves about our spiritual condition. It’s all too easy to drift along, assuming that we belong to Christ, even while we are putting our faith in all sorts of other things. We might think that we are good people because we are members of the church. We might take pride in our regular attendance in worship. We might feel good about ourselves because we put financial contributions in the offering plate or because we take the Lord’s Supper when it is offered to us. We might trust our salvation to the fact of our baptism or the fact that we have made a public profession of faith.

But the sad truth is that it is possible to do all these good things and still be living in sin, still be separated from the grace of God. In fact, precisely because we know the good news of the cross of Christ, it is so easy for us to presume upon God's grace, continuing to live the way we want to because we are confident that Christ will forgive us, regardless of what we do. (Jeremiah 7:1-11)

Yes, it is so easy for sin to deceive us because we are all too often willing to go along with its lies. And so we find all sorts of creative ways to rationalize our sin: "It won't hurt to give into temptation this one time. God would want me to be happy, right?" Or, "Yeah, I may have lost my temper, but he got what was coming to him anyway." And so we drift along, focusing on our desires and neglecting the needs of others, and thus forgetting all about God and His perfect law of love.

So that's why, sometimes, we need someone else to speak the truth into our lives, just as Paul wrote these letters to the Corinthian Christians. Sometimes we need someone who has a lot of experience in the Christian life, someone who knows the Bible, and who knows us just as well, to set us straight. It is that sort of straight-talking truth-telling that is both the principal method and the primary purpose of all rightly administered church discipline.

Now, we can't deny that hearing this kind of truth about ourselves is often uncomfortable. It can even be painful, as our responsive reading makes clear (Hebrews 12:4-14). But just as physical training starts with stiffness and fatigue and ends with flexibility, strength and energy, so spiritual discipline is for our good. As Paul says in verse 10, the whole point of such truth-telling is not to tear us down but to build us up.

And that's why we should not treat our elders who tell us the truth as if they are just a bunch of judgmental jerks, trying to make themselves look smart by making us feel ashamed. That certainly wasn't true of Paul, who clearly had the best interests of the Corinthians at heart. After all, he was the organizing pastor of their congregation, and verse 1 reminds us that he had been to visit them two times. In short, Paul's history with these people demonstrated his clear concern for them.

But that same history also meant that he not only knew a lot about what the Bible says. No, he also knew all the people to whom he was writing, all their personalities and all their personal struggles, as well as whatever sin problems were plaguing their community. It was this combination of theological expertise and personal relationship that made Paul uniquely qualified to tell them the truth whether they liked it or not – and those are the same qualifications we should seek in our own ruling and teaching elders.

For Paul wasn't the only one with that kind of knowledge. Verse 1 reminds us that just as it took 2 or 3 witnesses to make a charge stick under the Old Testament law, so Paul had every intention of getting some independent confirmation of what was really going on in Corinth. In short, Paul was no lone ranger – he understood that more than one qualified perspective on a situation always yields the clearest judgment.

This is precisely the reason why Presbyterians exercise church discipline the way we do. For we don't rely on one priest to rule over each congregation. Instead, we have a whole session of ruling elders who know the Bible and the Westminster Standards just as they know all of us – these are the people we trust to pray for us and counsel us. And we don't rely on one bishop to make the rules for a

group of congregations – no, both ruling and teaching elders gather in presbytery meetings to seek to determine God’s will, and to apply the truth of the Scriptures to our common life together.

In other words it is precisely passages such as this one that have convinced us Presbyterians of the benefits of our system of government, proving without a doubt that a group of knowledgeable, caring Christians are best equipped to speak the truth into our individual lives with patience, with love, and yes, with authority.

But we will only be able to reap the benefits of such loving, patient authority if we have the right attitude towards it. For even if we hear the truth from someone we trust and respect, and even if that trusted authority figure can clearly show us from the Scriptures that a certain area of our life is not in fact in line with God’s Will, it’s still easy to dismiss their words as mere opinion. “Oh, you don’t know the whole story. Oh, you’re misinterpreting that passage.” After all, we’re just as good at self-justification as we are at rationalization, aren’t we? It’s so easy for us to ignore the truth and keep on doing what feels good or makes sense to us.

And so that’s why Paul challenges the Corinthians the way he does in verse 5, not just to listen to what he says, but to take a good, hard look in the mirror: “Examine yourselves. Prove yourselves. Test yourselves. You say you trust in Christ, and if that’s true, His Spirit is living within you. So, are you displaying His character, demonstrating His self-sacrificial, unconditional love for others? Are you just as sold out for God and His Kingdom as He is? Or are you kidding yourself about your spiritual condition?”

That’s not a bad set of questions for us to ask ourselves, either. For if the good news is that God pours out His grace on undeserving sinners, and if the good news is that Jesus Christ has done everything necessary to apply this saving grace to undeserving sinners, we do not have access to this saving grace without trusting in Christ as our Savior and bowing the knee to Him as our Lord. Are we really trusting Him this way? Is Christ’s Spirit really living within us?

And even if we are trusting in Christ, are we growing in grace? In verses 9 and 11, Paul wanted the Corinthians to be strong and complete – could we honestly say the same thing about ourselves? Are our lives becoming more and more like Christ’s? Are we, as verse 11 says, likeminded with one another, or do we continue to insist on our own way? Are we living in peace with one another, or are we continuing to hold grudges? Are we greeting one another with the same sort of true affection and love that the ancient Greeks expressed with kisses? Or do we imagine that we are somehow self-sufficient, not needing to encourage others, not needing others to challenge us?

So, as we close our study of this letter, let’s do what Paul challenged the Corinthians to do: let’s examine ourselves. Let’s take a close look at how much we really love God and love other people. Let’s be willing to listen to others who might have a better perspective on our lives than we do. Instead of being guided by our own reason or experience or feelings, let’s allow the Scriptures to be our infallible measure of truth. And in all these ways, let’s allow God to have His way with us, molding and making us more into the likeness of Christ each and every day.