



## Another Visit

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

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Please turn in your Bibles to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. It should be familiar to you by now. You might even have a placeholder. After several months, your Bible might even open to 2 Corinthians. We are approaching the end of our sermon series. After this week, there will be just three more sermons as we look at chapter 13, and then, before we know it, Easter will be upon us. We are coming now to the very end of this book, and Paul continues in the same vein in which he has been informing us, but it is still helpful to us, and he has much yet to teach us.

This morning, we'll be looking at the second half of chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians, specifically verses 11-21. So, please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians 12, beginning at verse 11:

*I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!*

*Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. 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. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit.*

*Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps? Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved.*

*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. I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have opened up your Word to us, that not only have you given it to us, but you have given to us your Spirit to guide us into all truth. We pray this morning, Lord, that you would attend our way, that you would illuminate your Word so we might learn who you are, what you have done, what your promises are. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We have spent some time in this book of 2 Corinthians, so most of you know by now that this letter focuses on Paul's defense of his ministry. As a result, it's a very personal letter, perhaps Paul's most emotional letter, and it is very direct as Paul addresses the church at Corinth. But this letter is also about the strength and the health of the church. Paul is not just concerned for himself; he's concerned for the church, the congregation at Corinth.

In fact, Paul uses the preposition *for* or *on behalf of* more times in this letter than in any other letter. "For you," he will say so often. "On your behalf." More than twice as often in this letter than in the pivotal book of Romans. So, Paul is about to describe a visit he's going to undertake, and as he begins to describe it, he tells the congregation what the church should look like. They need to reject the teaching of the super-apostles, and they need to, instead, look to the gospel.

Paul has given them the truth, and now here he repeats it again, that they are to stand on the foundation from God, they are to sacrifice for others, and they are to live out their sanctification. *Foundation, sacrifice, and sanctification*. This, beloved, is a prescription not just for the church at Corinth; it's a prescription for *our* church, for you and for me, as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Humility**

Let's begin, then, by looking at Paul's first element of a healthy church. He says a healthy church stands on a strong foundation. That foundation begins with humility. We've seen this over and over again. Paul has been stressing the Christian virtue of humility, of being humble. He has done it in many different ways throughout this letter. He does this so often because he's speaking to a church that has been weakened by a lack of humility. The most obvious damage that had been done at this church in Corinth is a result of their lack of humility.

Their leaders had not modeled humility but, instead, the opposite. So, it's not surprising that this lack of humility has infected the church. This is an important aspect of leadership, whether it is leadership in the church or leadership in the home or leadership at school or leadership at work. We show what we value to others, and when we do that, others follow. So, if we want others to go in the correct direction, we must lead them in that direction. We must not think it is enough to speak. We must act in a way that others can follow. We must value the right things.

At Corinth, it had gotten so bad Paul was compelled to defend himself just to get the attention of the congregation. Paul understood humility. That's why he knew it was foolish to try to impress others. He only does this form of address to get the attention of a congregation that is enamored with foolish boasting. Over and over again, he states that he is speaking as a fool, acting as a fool...eight times in chapters 11 and 12 alone.

This is not something Paul would voluntarily do, because even when Paul is defending himself against attacks, even when Paul is reminding the Christians in Corinth he is no less than these super-apostles who have been denigrating him, he says, "I'm nothing." Do you see that in verse 11? "For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing." What a sharp statement from the apostle Paul, writer of books of the Bible, planter of churches extraordinaire, theologian, missionary, pastor.

He has much to his name, but Paul says, "I am nothing." There is a principle here that you and I can follow. It's not that Paul is denying his own value. It's not that Paul is saying, "I'm a miserable excuse for a human being. Don't listen to me." It's not that Paul is denying the value of his work and saying, "The churches that have been planted are all a waste of time." No. Paul is acknowledging here that everything he has done is a result of God's grace. Paul himself is nothing. Jesus is everything, and Jesus has brought all this about through Paul.

Now, the church could not see the difference between the humility of Paul and the pride of the false teachers, so the result was there were cracks beginning in the foundation they were to stand on. You can imagine what that would look like. Have you ever had the experience of driving your car on the highway, and a stone kicks up and makes a loud clanking noise on your windshield? You look at your windshield, and it looks like everything is fine, and you say, "Well, I'm glad I escaped unharmed."

You park your car, and you get out to take a closer look, and you see a small little chip in the windshield. Perhaps again you will say, "Well, at least that's not very bad. It won't affect my vision. There's just a very small chip in my windshield." Then, as you go in and out and drive your car over the next week, you notice that small chip has now become a small spiderweb of cracks. If you don't do anything about it, eventually those cracks will spread over the entirety of the windshield so that you can see nothing, and then the windshield actually is of no use. It's unsafe because it has been cracked.

Or perhaps you've had the experience of having a crack in your slab for your home, for your foundation. You know you can't just leave it to sit there as is and ignore it and say, "That's only one small crack in all of my foundation." If you leave it alone, that crack will spread. It will destroy your foundation. That's what Paul is reminding us here. The cracks in the foundation of the church at Corinth might seem small at first, but they spread. If the church would have truly understood what was happening, they would have defended Paul and rejected the pride of these so-called super-apostles.

We have seen this over and over again. Humility is the key Christian virtue, yet how many of us cultivate it? Are you willing today to be less so Jesus can be more? Humility is the foundation of the Christian church. Paul also goes on to describe this foundation as being laid by God. God is responsible for the foundation. Paul wants us to see that it is God who is at work. The foundation of this church is not only seen in Paul's humble life and ministry. It is also seen in God's verification of the gospel ministry.

He says this here in verse 12. "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works." God knows us, so for our benefit, not because he has to, he gives us signs of his work. We do that all the time ourselves. We look for signs that something is true and genuine. If we have an important paper to look at or to review, we look for the watermark or the seal to know that it's genuine. When we

get a new computer and open it up, we're encouraged when we see that little sticker that says "Intel" inside. We know it's genuine. We need these signs to help us, because we are weak in our understanding.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that they have seen God's signs that he was a true apostle, that Paul had been sent from God. That's what an apostle is: one sent from God. "These signs," Paul says, "were not done in secret. They were done among you. They were done among you with utmost patience." This is a reminder that God's work is not limited to the spectacular or to benefits. When Paul says these signs were done with utmost patience, he is referring to the persecution he experienced.

So often, modern so-called miracle workers want you to believe they can work miracles because they are the healthiest, wealthiest, most powerful people on the earth, but Paul actually tells us the exact opposite. He says he was weak, he struggled, he was persecuted, because the signs were not to vindicate Paul. The signs were to vindicate Paul's message of the gospel. That's what they were for. God chose the foundation.

So, when Paul describes these events as signs, wonders, and mighty works, it is significant that they ratify the truth of Paul's message. The important thing was the message...not the sign, not the messenger, but the message. The wonders remind us that these works amazed people who saw them, that they could only have come from God. They were mighty works, beyond nature. They were made by God to let us see that his truth has come to us. God laid that foundation in his Word.

So often today, I think, we are tempted to want signs and wonders and mighty works, as if somehow we would be the beneficiaries of that, that the Corinthians had more from God than we do because they had these signs and wonders and we don't have them each and every day. The truth of the matter is the only reason the Corinthians had these signs and wonders was to ratify and vindicate the message Paul was bringing. The Corinthians would have loved to have had access to God's Word the way you and I do.

In their congregation, they likely only had one copy of God's Word, the public copy in the church, and that only of the Old Testament, because the New Testament had not been written yet. They didn't have Bibles in their homes. Can you imagine what they would think if you owned a dozen or 20 different Bibles with different translations and different helps in your home? Can you imagine what they would think if they could have had machines that would speak God's Word to them when they were in the car or in their home or in their office so they could never be apart from God's Word?

That's what you have, beloved. You have a sure foundation. It has been ratified by signs and wonders, but we stand upon the foundation of God's Word. We see this same phrase used over and over again...*signs, wonders, and mighty works*...to vindicate and testify to the truth of God's Word. In Acts, chapter 2, Peter uses this same series of words to attest that Jesus was sent by God, that he was the Messiah. Peter says Jesus was attested as God's servant by signs, wonders, and mighty works.

In Hebrews, chapter 2, God tells us he has attested to the gospel and its truth through signs, wonders, and mighty works. In Romans, chapter 15, Paul attests to the truth of the gospel ministry because of signs, wonders, and mighty

works. A healthy church has a foundation that is laid by God in which its people are humble because they know the Lord is the one who is at work.

## **Sacrifice**

The second thing a healthy church must cultivate is a commitment to sacrifice. Paul shows us that he sacrificed for God's people. He sacrificed, first, by not taking anything from them. He describes this in verse 13. "For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!" That just drips with sarcasm. "The worst thing I did to you was not burden you." Can you imagine that?

You see, this was jealousy running rampant in the church. The church at Corinth was self-centered, and it was jealous. Behind verse 13 are the words of Paul's opponents, who are saying that Paul had shortchanged their church, that he hadn't done what he had done in other churches, that they had gotten short shrift, that they were lacking, that Paul was holding out on them.

Of course, the problem here is that they were focused on themselves and what they could get, so Paul counters with how wrong they are. He says to them, "Look around. What are you missing? The only thing you're missing is that I haven't burdened myself upon you." Isn't that true? When we focus on ourselves, we miss the benefits and the blessings we have. We take them for granted.

Think about this past week's storm. If you are anything like me, during this past week your power went out for some period of time, and perhaps even your water went out and your heat went out. If you're anything like me, you became exceedingly annoyed by that. Anyone who knows me knows I have absolutely no use for camping when people voluntarily deny themselves electricity, heat, and water, but I was compelled to have that in my home, and I was not happy about it. "I should have these things. They're my right. Why is someone denying that to me?"

What I didn't do was stop and think that right now, as we sit here, there are hundreds of millions of people around the globe who don't have electricity every day, who don't have heat, who don't have clean, drinkable, running water. I became so obsessed with myself and my own needs I forgot how richly I have been blessed by the Lord my God. That's what can happen to us.

So, Paul has to remind the Corinthians that he was not a burden to them. In verse 14 he says, "Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you." Paul didn't burden them. He actually provided for them. In fact, he wanted their good more supremely than his own. He could think of no better way to express it than to say, "I seek not yours but you."

Here Paul is modeling Jesus. Jesus does not want your stuff. Jesus does not need our resources or our kingdoms that we build or the skills we have. What Jesus wants is *you*. That's what Jesus is after. He's after *you*, that you might serve him, that you might be reconciled to God, that you might know the blessedness of his grace.

Paul not only did not take from others; he spent on them. He was willing to sacrifice. He says in verse 15, "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls." What Paul understood here was that he didn't really need anything he possessed. All of it is temporary. You know the old saying, "You can't take it with you." Well, it's true. You can't

take what you possess into the grave. But there's more than that. It's not just that you *can't* take it. You won't *want* to take it.

Do you honestly think you're going to want a used car in heaven, that in glory you'll want to live in a drafty house that loses power, that has PVC pipes that crack? Is that your ideal living for all eternity? What we have here now is temporary. It's not intended for us forever. All that we have is on loan from the Lord. Paul, understanding this, is willing to sacrifice for Jesus' sake, for the gospel's sake, because he knows what he has isn't really his anyway.

I think, perhaps, one of the most poignant quotes about this comes from the martyr missionary Jim Elliot. He said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." That is the mentality we must have. We have to think about not only our eternal benefit, but we have to think about others' eternal benefit as well. That's what drove Paul.

He uses two very vivid words that he will use up all of his resources. He says, "I will most gladly spend and be spent." There is a sense in which we lose some of the force here in English, because as you look at it, it's the same word Paul uses twice: to *spend*. But these are two different Greek words. They're very closely related, but the second is more intensive. It is a doubling down, if you will.

Paul says, "I am ready to be exhausted, to give up what I have to spend, and I am willing to be spent completely so there's nothing left." Does this describe your life? Are you willing to give up what you have for others? Because that is the way of Christ. It's what Jesus did for you. He gave up what he had that you might have life. He gave up what was his own so you might know the forgiveness of sins. As we follow Jesus, can we do any less than that to sacrifice for others?

Notice also Paul had the right priorities. He's willing to sacrifice material things to save souls. Paul is not trying to make the Corinthians' lives easier for them. He's not focused on society or on politics or on culture. He's not saying, "I'm willing to be spent so there's more equality in Corinth" or "I'm willing to give up everything I have so the Corinthian congregation has a greater political influence at Corinth." No. He's focused on one thing. Do you see it? "Your souls." That is always the focus of the gospel. Do not let anyone take your eyes off that. Souls are the most important. They are the most valuable.

The gospel is about eternal change and reward, not temporary, material helps. Paul spent in spite of the response he received from the Corinthians. We might respond to Paul and say, "You know, I'd like to spend for others, but no one responds well to me. I wish people around me would honor the gospel, would believe it, would appreciate when I share it with them, but when I try to help others, they don't have gratitude. They're not appreciative. What do I do with that, Paul?" Paul understands this. Even though the Corinthians responded to him, he says, with less love, he still loved more.

This is perhaps the hardest thing for us to do: to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us, but that is what we're called to do. More and more opportunities, beloved, will come up for you to experience this. As our society and our culture turns more and more against God, against his Word, and against the church, you will have

opportunities to pour yourself out to your family, your friends, your neighbors, your coworkers, and they will not be appreciative of it, at least at first. We must spend and be spending. Leave the results to the Lord.

## Sanctification

The third thing about a healthy church is that it must take seriously growth in Christ. We call this *sanctification*, becoming more and more like Jesus, more and more holy. Paul is focused upon this as well. Paul's accusers were projecting their own thoughts and their own sins onto Paul. Look at verse 19. "Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you?" Paul's opponents were telling the church, "Paul is just trying to defend himself. He's just trying to get the upper hand. He just wants to take advantage of you."

Of course, that would be obvious to them, because that's exactly what they did. They were mistreating and robbing this congregation. They were constantly defending their own actions. They were telling the Corinthians why they needed to be their servants, why they needed to do everything they said, why they needed to hand over their money. So they tried to make all of Paul's efforts and all of Paul's teaching about himself, but Paul, instead, was focused on God.

That is the beginning of our sanctification: when we focus ourselves upon the Lord. Paul puts it this way. He says, "It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved." He spoke in the sight of God, in his presence. God was aware of what Paul was doing. This was not a debate tactic Paul was using. It was how he lived: focused on the Lord. Way back in chapter 2, verse 17, Paul used this exact same phrase to tell them he was not a peddler of God's Word, but he spoke God's Word in the sight of God in Christ. It describes all of Paul's ministry and life.

This is the mentality of a sanctifying church. Believers speak and live *coram Deo* (in the presence of God). They know God is the only audience that matters. They are willing to be judged wrongly by others. They are willing to be thought foolish by the world. They don't focus on the world and its judgments. They only look to the Lord. He is their standard. This meant that all of this was planned for the benefit of the Corinthians. When our focus is on Jesus, his mission is the most important, and his mission is the building up of his people. So that's what Paul was looking for. He tells us, "It was all done for your upbuilding."

Now, there is a crucial distinction to be made between *justification* (being made right with God) and *sanctification* (growing more and more in Christ). We must have each of these in our Christian life. It is not sufficient simply to come to faith in Jesus Christ and then not to obey him, not to follow him. If we don't follow the Lord Jesus, we haven't truly believed, and we can't follow Jesus until he has first made us redeemed sinners. We must be justified, and then we must pursue sanctification. That is a healthy church, Paul is saying.

We are called to put sin to death so we might be more and more like Jesus. This is not something we can do on our own, but we must do it by God's work of grace, and we must want that for others around us as well. Paul so believes this he concludes this section by voicing his fears. This need to kill sin, to become more and more like Jesus, is so important Paul is not afraid to give voice to his fears. He wants this church, he wants *you*, to kill sin and to grow in grace. His great desire for the church is that they would follow Jesus.

A church that is not focused on the Lord and is not sacrificial will tolerate sin, and when Christians tolerate sin, that shows itself in the body of believers. The sins Paul lists in verse 20 are harmful to the peace and unity of the church...quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. He's describing problems in the church, but they arise out of sin in believers.

So, if we would have our church be a place where there's no quarreling, where we're not jealous of one another, where we are calm and not angry, where there's no hostility among people, where we don't speak ill of others, we don't slander or gossip but speak well of them and build them up... If we want order and not disorder and chaos, we must be killing sin in our lives. That's what Paul is telling us.

I have to put to death sin in my own life if I love others around me. Let me say that again. If I love others around me, I must put sin to death in my life. Husbands, if you love your wife, you must put sin to death in your life. Wives, if you love your husband, you must put your sin to death in your life. Children, if you want harmony in your home, you must put to death the sin in your life. There is no escaping it. That's where sanctification begins.

Now, that doesn't mean sanctification is easy. I don't say that as if you flip a switch and sin is gone in your life. I don't say that to mean it's an easy task to rid myself of sin. No, it is a daily battle, month upon month, year upon year. But if Paul delighted to see his children walk in the truth, then it pained and humbled him to see them living in error. That's why he says, "I fear when I come I may not find you as I wish. God may humble me. I'll be discouraged to see that you are still wallowing in that same sin of impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that you practiced previously."

But there's hope, Paul says. You can repent. He says it in the negative to them. "I don't want to come and see that you've not repented." Of course, what that means is he wants to see that they've repented. That's the hope for the Christian. Repentance is a grace of God. It is a gift of God. Repentance is a turning from sin and a turning to Jesus. Leave your sin and come to Jesus.

Now, again, this is not an easy thing. It means reading God's Word, meditating upon God's Word so you can spot the sin in your life, and then, instead of being lazy about it, striving with all your power in prayer to the Lord, asking the Holy Spirit to give you his grace and his power so you might leave off from sin, holding yourself accountable to others, telling others they can call you on your sin (and that's not a bad thing; that's a good thing) and that they can point you to Jesus.

If we struggle with sin without the hope of Jesus, we are of men the most miserable. But our struggle has found its solution in the grace of God and the blood of Jesus Christ. We have hope because there is no sin that is so great it cannot be repented of.

In conclusion, it may seem like Paul wants us to become the perfect church with perfect Christians immediately, but that's not what he has told us. God's Word is telling us to be a normal, healthy church that is focused on the things God has commanded us. We must recognize the foundation of our church and our lives is the work of the Lord. That will humble us and cause us to trust the Lord more and more.



We must be ready to sacrifice, not thinking first of ourselves and of our comfort but thinking of others. We must be ready to serve others, to bless others, even to be inconvenienced by others, and we must be committed more and more every day to be like Jesus. We can only do that by focusing on the Lord and his grace and using his means to put sin to death. This is a long struggle, but the good news of the gospel is that Jesus has already won the victory. We look to Jesus because he is able.