
Heart Examination in Ministry Exhortation

2 Corinthians 13:1-10 ¹⁶

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Here is the heart of the book and the knot tying the themes together.

Biblical confrontation of sin...

Spiritual power in personal weakness...

Careful examination of self...

Needful severity against unrepentance...

How should we be dealing with people like what Paul faced?

How should they be responding to Biblical leadership?

An Authentic Witness against Them (v. 1b-4)

¹ This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ² 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— ³ since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴ 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.

He reminds the church every truth must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Therefore, Paul was making a third trip to come to them.

The Biblical Requirement (v. 1)

Paul's use of language here is on purpose. He uses the ordinal numbers (second and third visits) and followed by the cardinal numbers ("two or three witnesses"). Why does he do this? Paul has regularly either quoted or alluded to Old Testament texts. Some have noted that there is "an abundance of direct and indirect quotations from the five books of Moses, the Psalms and Proverbs, and the Prophets." (Kistemaker, p. 444).

There is evidence that both Jewish and Gentile Christians turned these verses into proverbs. In other words, some commands in the Mosaic Law were used or explained in other passages. These were then turned into wisdom guidance for believers. So the Mosaic Law was not being brought across into the New Covenant as commands. Instead, explanations and uses of the Law were being used as wisdom literature like the proverbs. It is to be noted that Paul seems to do the same thing in several instances.

So, Paul may be referring to the proverbial passage of Deuteronomy 19:15.

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¹⁵ "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

This wisdom proverb is in accord with Jesus' teaching on church discipline (Matthew 18:16). They had removed the person who had committed incest (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). Paul had also taught all the churches the rule of requiring the testimony of two or three witnesses particularly in the case of a charge against an elder (1 Timothy 5:19).

The Factual Case (v. 2)

By the time it is over, Paul would have made three visits and written three letters. He has complied with the requirements. He has done more than the minimum.

The apostle is not trying to be confrontational. His deep desire is that all those sinners repent and follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Then they will support and strengthen the body of Christ. But if they fail to listen and obey, Paul will not spare them when he arrives in Corinth.

The Untainted Proof (v. 3-4)

In a court, testimony must be unbiased, untainted and by a credible witness. Evidently, the church was arguing that Paul was none of the above. Their defense was not to justify their actions, but to discredit the witness.

Paul was charged with not being a credible witness because he was weak in person. A true man of God had power and presence. Paul didn't have it. So he had no authority to charge them. You see them confusing personal power and presence with authority. Authority is not invested in the person themselves but in the Biblical office. One does not have to have a certain bearing, a certain way, a certain personality to exercise the authority God has invested in the office they bear. This was true of Paul as an Apostle. This is true today with the elders.

Paul counters with pointing to Jesus Christ. He came in weakness to do powerful works. The most powerful work Jesus did was to be crucified and raised from the dead. Authority does not depend on power. The church is an upside-down kingdom. It is the weak, the serving, the foolish in the world's eyes, that God often chooses, sets aside and empowers in overseeing the church.

Paul may live a crucified life; but, when he comes to them and deals with them he has the authority and thus the power to charge and convict them. He has been granted the authority as an Apostle. Through his suffering he has experienced and exemplified the crucified life that Jesus requires. But this personal weakness will not keep Paul from confronting the unrepentant. But, his hope is that this letter will be used by God to bring them to repentance. This leads to the warning that follows.

A Stern Warning to Them (v. 5-6)

He urges, actually commands, the sinning Corinthians to examine themselves to determine whether they are actually saved.

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.

The Emphatic Command (v. 5)

They must examine themselves. It is a command. This is not a suggestion. This is an Apostolic command to the unrepentant and rebellious. The command is not to examine themselves to see if they are right. Paul has already proven that they are wrong. They are sinning. Since they will not recognize nor repent of their sins, then the question is: Are they truly Christians? Are they in the faith?

They must test themselves. This is how the examination takes place. So, what is the test? What must they do? Do they look back to their original profession? Do they assert that they are baptized? Do they recite the long list of times they have spoken in tongues? Do they cite their clear consciences as they boldly and wickedly partake of the Lord's Table? The test in the book and in all the New Testament is simple. Repent of their open sin and they will have passed the test. That means they must turn away in repentance from the sins Paul has listed in the immediate context. Further, they must reject the false apostles, recognize Paul's authority and repent of their quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder (2 Corinthians 12:20).

Are they not understanding something about the nature of being a Christian? To be a Christian is to have Christ in you. Repenting of sin is evidence that Christ is in them. Now carefully listen: sinless perfection is not evidence. The evidence of Christ in you is not that you don't sin, but what you do with the sin you do. I am not saying Christians are free to live any way they want. Both books written to the Corinthian church trumpet against that. The evidence of Christ in us that we are convicted of our sins, confess them to God and to those we should and turn away from them in that moment. As he does so often in the rest of his books, he locates the required conduct of Christians in the character of Christ in them. We have commands. But we obey the Lord's commands not because they are law, but because of who we are in Christ.

Now, this command is given to a group of people. It is not just for every Christian who seeking to please the Lord to regular and repeated self-examination in order to have an assurance of faith. That is not the thrust of this text. This text is addressed to people who are clearly, openly and without no regard to the Word or the elders are going on in their sin. More about that in a moment.

Why is this command to examine themselves important? Because some are rebellious, are not addressing the charge against them and are attacking the accuser. Instead of humility and confession, there is prideful self-defense and self-justification.

The Serious Implications (v. 5b)

It is possible that they will fail the test. If they examine themselves spiritually and honestly, they will see that they are sinning. The test will be: will they repent? If they don't, then they are not in Christ and Christ is not in them. The consequence will be that the church will remove them as unbelievers.

Unrepentant, sinning people have no right to the assurance of salvation. Many who will not deal with their sin take refuge in some idea of assurance. This is false and futile. Sinning, rebellious people who will not repent must be challenged as to whether or not they are Christians. They must be offered no assurance of salvation unless they do turn from their sins. I am fully aware that to many this feels unloving and unkind. But after much patient shepherding, confronting, counseling there comes a point where "Examine yourself..." becomes the Biblically loving and right thing to do. It is unloving and unwise to allow a self-deceived person to go on in their sin and end up under the wrath of God.

The Personal Affirmation (v. 6)

He hopes (probably meaning, is assured and wants them to agree) that he has passed the test. He is a person who repents of sins. He examines himself, responds to the Spirit's conviction. He repents of his sins and therefore, confirms that he is a believer. Any honest examination of Paul's life will bear that out. It seems these words were being addressed to both the unrepentant and to the church at large. Will they see that Paul truly has Christ in him and thus is in Christ?

A Prayerful Wish for them (v. 7-10)

He hopes to find them mature, having no need for further chastisement.

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. ⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹ For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. ¹⁰ 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 the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

Its Request (v. 7a, 9b)

Paul models for us how to pray for the rebellious and unrepentant.

He is praying for repentance, that they may do what is right. We ask God to do His work in them so that they will turn away from sin and unto righteousness. We pray this because we want this. We do not want them to keep going down a path that may end in eventual destruction. Our true desire is not to see God punish, but rather to see God transform. That is what we want, isn't it?

He is praying for restoration, that they may united again in joyful fellowship. He is concerned that they be brought back into true fellowship with the believers. At this point there is estrangement due to sin and stubbornness. But real repentance will lead to restoration. What we should want is a kind of restoration that brings sweet fellowship. Genuine repentance and forgiveness restores the fellowship. We cannot restore people to a distance. We restore people into the circle of love and loving.

Its Reasons (v. 6-8)

It is not self-serving. It is not to appear to have passed the test himself. Paul is anticipating that they will even use this to justify himself. He is not interested in their affirmation as though he needed them to certify him. He did require their acceptance of his Apostleship and their submission to the exercise of it.

It is for the other's good. It is that they might be pleasing to God. This is his driving motivation. Brothers and sisters, when we are counseling or confronting people who are not responding Biblically, this must be our motivation. It is easy, particularly in marital and relational conflict to want, no, to demand, that we be shown as being *right*. All we do in dealing with each other should be reflecting the heart of Christ and the attitude of Paul.

It is a part of faithful obedience. It is because genuine spiritual leaders have to do what the truth demands. I had a conversation just recently with church leaders in another place who were struggling with whether or not they were *obligated* to deal with the unrepentant. They knew they were authorized to. What they didn't understand that entailed a responsibility to obey God, both with the confrontation and with the restoration.

Its Realities (v. 9-10)

There are some realities they must accept.

It is a good thing when leaders are weak and followers are strong. This is the upside-down nature of the kingdom. Now the sinning people in the church meant it as a put down. They meant it to demean Paul and deny his authority. They were the strong ones. They were the spiritual ones. Paul sees in this an underlying reality. But it was not as they thought. The weakness of leaders, the weakness of their crucified lives, their many sorrows and suffering, their wounds and trials and troubles all bring glory to Jesus and strength to the believers.

It is a good thing when leaders don't have to exercise their God-given authority. The best thing is when people hear and heed the preaching, teaching and warnings of the leaders. It is a grand thing when God grants repentance. It is a wonderful thing when people are forgiven and restored. This is the point. This is the aim. We all along with Paul are so joyful when a person repents, is forgiven, and is fully reconciled and restored.

Frankly, it also saddens us when forgiveness is not given, is not genuine, is not transforming and or does not lead to restoration of fellowship. Because then, there will have to be counsel, confrontation and Biblically based call to obedience. Maybe someone here knows that they have not obeyed God as they should in forgiving and being restored to fellowship. Please, repent and obey today. Whole heartedly forgive and fling yourself into joyful fellowship with those who sinned against you. This is what Paul is poised to do even with the core opposition to him.

Godly leaders have been empowered to build up the church. Sometimes this is done by pruning away the dead branches. Paul is affirming, not denying, that chastening and discipline build up the church. The authority God gave him and in much more limited way, given the elders, when used Biblically will result, even in correction or discipline, to build up the church.

Reflect and Respond

Great caution and care must be taken when we are going to accuse or charge a believer with sin and unrepentance.

It must be done in a Biblical way.

It must meet the Biblical criteria.

It must not be gossip or slander.

May we be tender, sensitive and poised to repent of sin.

Regularly examine yourself if you find repentance rare and unusual...

Humbly respond to others who love you enough to confront your sin...

Quickly repent, confess and ask for forgiveness...

Immediately, based on the cross, forgive upon confession...

Respect the authority of the Word of God.

In the written form we have it...

In the Biblical authority of the leaders...

Pray regularly for those who are continuing in sin.

That they will repent...

That they will be restored...

That we will be glad...