

## 2 Corinthians

I have very little time for 2 Corinthians; it is a shame to have to deal with such an amazingly deep letter in such a short time, but that is life. We have looked through Philemon already. Philemon and 2 Corinthians have something very important in common. These are the two letters in which Paul puts his whole person into encouraging Philemon on the one hand, and the Corinthian church on the other. In these two letters, he uses the example of his entire life to encourage them to come to a point of reconciliation, which I have already mentioned is the unifying theme for 2 Corinthians. The main aim of 2 Corinthians is an appeal to reconciliation.

I need to say a few words about the particular context and situation of 2 Corinthians. When you look at 2 Corinthians, you quickly see that Paul changed his mind on his travels. He says here in 2 Corinthians 1:23, “I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.” There was a change of plans. The scenario is this: after Paul writes 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, he stays in Ephesus. Paul made a sorrowful visit to the Corinthians, which occurred around 55 A.D. I believe that what he refers to in 2 Corinthians is this visit—that while he was in Ephesus, he made a round trip journey to Corinth. It was not a missionary journey; it does not figure in the first, the second, or the third missionary journey. It is a short trip across the Aegean Sea from Ephesus to Corinth and back. This is not recorded explicitly in other sources, but 2 Corinthians seems to imply that. Now Paul is setting out on his third missionary journey. Originally, he had planned to have his third missionary journey start in Ephesus, to go across to Corinth, up through Greece and Macedonia, and back down to Ephesus, but he changes that. He does not go back to Corinth as he says in what I have just quoted, but he goes up to Troas, over to Macedonia, and then down to Corinth. Before he arrives in Corinth, he writes 2 Corinthians from Macedonia and says, “There is a reason why I did not go directly back to Corinth, why I rather went up north, came across Macedonia, and now I am en route to visit you for the third time.” He says, “for the third time,” elsewhere, at a later part in 2 Corinthians. You need to understand that Paul had a change of itinerary. It is possible that there was some snickering and some back-talking in the Corinthian church, saying, “Look, Paul did not really come back. He is changing his mind. He does not really know what he is doing.” Paul has to defend himself by saying, “I honestly can tell you I did that on your behalf.”

Now if this hypothesis is correct—that Paul went on a brief visit to Corinth, the sorrowful visit, and there was pain and injury done both to Paul and among the Corinthian church, which we see in chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians—that needed some time to heal. Paul decides, rather than go right back and deal with it right away, he will allow some time. For their sake, not for his sake, he decides to travel the other way, then write 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, and then visit them and certainly deal with all those things.

Thus it is possible that we need to see the call to reconciliation in 2 Corinthians at least partially against the backdrop of a very painful time in which Paul continues the challenges that he faces with people who say, “We do not want to follow your call or your teaching.” Parts of the Corinthian church are fighting against what we have just discussed in 1 Corinthians. That is the situation, and Paul writes 2 Corinthians (perhaps from Philippi, although we do not know exactly where) in anticipation of his visit to the Corinthians. This, I believe, is also the occasion for writing to say, “This is the reason why I did not come to you earlier, and now let me call you to reconciliation before I arrive.” Paul follows a particular process for that call to reconciliation, and that is what I want to give you now in terms of the outline of 2 Corinthians.

In the first major part of 2 Corinthians, in chapters 1 and 2, Paul wishes to give the Corinthians, whom he is soon to visit for the third time, an explanation of his conduct. And his appeal says this: that far

from being unsure and indecisive about how he should go about his dealings with the Corinthians, he decided to change his plans on their behalf. The cause of his change of plans, and also the purpose of his last letter, are discussed in 2 Corinthians 1:15 to 2:2. We see that there was a letter written between 1 and 2 Corinthians. It was probably a letter connected with the painful visit. It probably dealt with a person, perhaps a leader of a minority group in Corinth, who discredited Paul and questioned his authority. Paul had to write concerning that, and now this is being dealt with in chapter 2. It seems as if that particular leader in that situation was willing to turn and listen. The church had said, "You must turn; you cannot go your own way. You must turn to the Gospel." Paul is dealing with that and he gives the purpose for his last letter.

Then comes a second section that is so amazing. In chapters 2 to 5, Paul gives, in anticipation of a major appeal for reconciliation, a reflection on his ministry. He does this because he is building the platform for his appeal for reconciliation. He is speaking about the source of his ministry, the message of his ministry, the cost of his ministry, and he is speaking about his perspective—all because of the great challenge that he faces from the Corinthians. So he gives an account of the source, the message, the cost, and the perspective. He describes his ministry. These chapters give us insight into how Paul understood his own ministry, which is wonderful.

Then comes the climax of the second Corinthian letter: namely, an appeal to the Corinthians, primarily for reconciliation, but there are other aspects as well. The appeal from chapters 6 to 13 is basically for reconciliation and some fruits connected with that reconciliation. Connected with that is the necessity for willingness to donate funds for the collection, in chapters 8 and 9, and the acceptance of apostolic authority in chapter 10. The major appeal for reconciliation has consequences in donations and apostolic authority. But the main focus, and the main thrust—particularly of the second section—points toward the call to reconciliation.

Let us look a little more in detail at 2 Corinthians. It is a wonderful letter, and we will keep this outline in our minds as we reflect on what Paul is presenting here. The main point that I find both in the explanation and in the reflection culminating in the appeal is this: that Paul uses himself as an example and an instrument of sanctification. It is not only that Paul says, "Because I am an apostle, let me tell you what you need to do." He says, "Look at how I live, and let my life be a challenge and an exhortation for you to reconcile among each other, to turn to the ways of God and to accept apostolic authority." I think it is a very important insight into 2 Corinthians to understand Paul's apostolic ministry as an example and instrument of sanctification.

As Paul does this, he does not defend himself, and that is a fine line. He does not act out of hurt in his identity and in his own self-understanding. He is simply concerned that the Corinthians would follow the purposes of God. Let us look at one particular passage, 2 Corinthians 13:3, where this point is illustrated. Here he says, "On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of those others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me." There is a demand from the church in Corinth that Paul justify himself, but he very much says, "I am not justifying myself. I am presenting what I am called to present to the Corinthians."

2 Corinthians 4:5 says, "For we do not preach" [and "we" would be Paul and the others] ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Here you have to be very careful. You must remember what I said in a previous lecture: that Paul has to be very healthy in his dealing with the church, so that he does not react and deal with the Corinthian church because of what he feels in his heart, but because of what the Corinthian church needs. He does not preach himself, but the Lord Jesus. If you are in a position of responsibility and you are wronged, if you experience injustice, you will be

tempted to react. Paul, however, is taking a step back and saying, “What is my identity in Christ? What is my purpose? What is my calling toward this church?” Then he reminds them and himself that he is a messenger of the Gospel. He is not preaching himself. He is not defending himself. He is here as a messenger of the living God. He has a commission to bring them from a place of immaturity to a place of maturity in terms of their Gospel growth, and he cannot allow his own little petty, unresolved problems to stand in the way of that commission. If you are in a position of responsibility, the first thing you must do when there is a problem is deal with yourself.

Also in parenting, and in all kinds of areas of life that I feel challenged with, we need first to step back and say, “What is going on here? What is happening to me? How am I responding to this in my heart? How am I reacting? What are the problems? How do I feel?” I want to respond, but I must first get that all clearly out on the table, pray about it, and perhaps talk about it with somebody else. Then I must reflect about what this situation requires from God—what is necessary. If you read 2 Corinthians 2 and see how Paul deals with the discipline of this person that has caused a lot of grief both to the church there and to him, he says, “There has been enough punishment for this person, simply for the church to say that this is wrong.” He was publicly ostracized in some way. Paul says that is enough. What this person now needs, from 2 Corinthians 2, is grace and support and encouragement. Paul is not interested in getting even; he is interested in measuring the amount of discipline this situation needs for the sake of reconciliation and healing, not for the sake of executing punishment. Paul measures his means of discipline by the outcome, which is reconciliation, return, and repentance. And oh, how I wish I would have that gift in times when I feel like I have to get right in there and straighten out the situation! What a great gift of God to have the measure of the hand such that the discipline is not too heavy but not too light, and it is conditioned by the outcome of reconciliation rather than by one’s own sense of straightening out the situation. What a great challenge that is for us, and what an example Paul gives! We must aspire to be in such a state of personal healing, discernment, and service to that situation that we would be able to appropriately measure our discipline and our challenge to a particular situation. My tendency is either to try to ignore the situation or to act so quickly and so imprudently that I manage to do a great deal of damage. Obviously, neither of these reactions produces the right measure of return, change, repentance, and moving into the ways of God.

We learn an enormous amount here from Paul, who acts not out of his own emotions, but out of a desire to meet the needs of the Corinthian church. I believe the Corinthian church challenged Paul to exercise this more than any other church. Part of the reason why God had Paul plow the Corinthian soil was so that Paul could be led to act this way so that we might see what pastoral care implies. We can look over the pastoral shoulder of Paul in 2 Corinthians more than anywhere else besides Philemon, and we can see how he measures and carefully adjusts what he says and how he relates for the purpose of reconciliation. It is fantastic and fascinating how he proclaims the message and deals with that church for the purpose of sanctification and growth. He is selfless in the sense that he is not busy with himself. He is like a driver who knows where all the controls are on the car, so he can look around and know exactly what to do. A bad driver is somebody who is mostly busy looking at the controls of the car and he can only occasionally glance out the window before he has to continue looking at the inside of the car. You cannot minister that way. You must learn to be an elegant driver who knows exactly how to maneuver the vehicle so you can be busy responding to the situation out there in the world. And often we are, in our own lives, like drivers who are still studying the dashboard.

It is an enormous challenge to know how to deal with the problems of a church, and thus Paul ministers as an agent of reconciliation. He ministers as a minister of the new covenant, and he approaches the Corinthians as a servant-leader. 2 Corinthians 1:24 says this: “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.” Actually, 2 Corinthians is filled with

indication and hints of how to approach major problems in human relationships. It shows how, in working with churches, to deal with the problems so that there is actually joy and maturity at the outcome rather than great frustration.

I would like to look at one passage just very briefly: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13. This is a wonderful passage that belongs to the beginning of the major appeal. After having spoken about the explanations for his change of plans, and after reflections on his ministry, here Paul appeals to the Corinthians for an open heart. That is so amazing. 2 Corinthians 6:12-13 says, "We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also." This was perhaps one of the most compelling, deepest, most heartfelt parts of Paul's appeal for reconciliation. He appeals so that they would say, "I want to learn about sexual morality. I want to learn of how I should be in marriage. I want to learn of how to conduct myself in the church. I want to learn of how to think. I want to learn how I can bring Christ into all areas of my life. I am willing. I want to turn. I want to soften." Paul says in this appeal here at the end of these verses, "We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours. We have opened our hearts widely to you. They remain open to you." Perhaps some of you who have teenagers could repeat that sentence and say that, in your relationship with your sons and daughters, you have opened your heart widely and desire that they respond and give some indication that they are alive. Somebody once said that hugging a teenager is like hugging a telephone pole and there is some truth to that, but that is the situation of the Corinthian church. There is just, "What is in there for me? How can I get the good of the Gospel and still maintain my own self-gratification?" There is a lot of that scheming and maintaining and holding on to things, and Paul says, "You know, I have opened myself up to you completely. I have laid it all out. I have explained to you my life. I have no hidden agenda. This is the Gospel. I am throwing myself in. Please respond; I appeal to you with an open heart. Signal that you desire the fruit of the Gospel to grow in your life."

In these first verses, verses 4-10 of chapter 6, Paul goes through the challenges that he has experienced himself as a servant of God: "In great trouble, in hardship and distress, in beatings, imprisonment and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights, hunger, purity, understanding, patience, and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love, in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left, through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine yet regarded as impostors, known yet regarded as unknown, dying and yet we live on, beaten and yet not killed, sorrowful yet always rejoicing, poor yet making many rich, having nothing and yet possessing everything." Paul is not holding anything back, and that is why he can say, "I do as Christ does, so you do as I do." It is a dangerous line, but it is very true, because Paul is giving himself to the service of God and so he can encourage those who resist the purposes of God to take him as an example.

Paul could completely exhaust himself doing that, except that he has one secret. I want to leave you with that secret. Let us turn to the beginning of 2 Corinthians. Here is the secret why Paul is able to endure and put all of himself on the line. 1 Corinthians 1:4 says, "I praise God, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." We need to meditate on that verse, because Paul is sincere. He is receiving true comfort from the living God and he is passing on to the Corinthians that comfort, that message of reconciliation, that ability to lay himself out. He is not a martyr, and he is not becoming exhausted in his ministry, because he passes on what he has received. He knows his source and he knows the source to be the comfort of God, the Gospel that he has received. Let us meditate on that, so we will not go out and exhaust ourselves surrendering in this way to the ministry. No, it is what God gives us, what we are receiving, that we can then pass on and be a means of reconciliation and of demonstrating that grace with which God has showered us.